

PAUSING ON THE THRESHOLD

By Rev. Karen Hering

Interim times – and any time of great change – are marked by that liminal power residing on the threshold between what is no longer and what is not yet. But it is easy to lose touch with that power by moving too quickly into a conversation with the future.

Instead we might wisely pause on the threshold long enough to ask, “what is the conversation we are still having with the past and how might we bring that conversation to a healthy close so that a new and necessary conversation with the future might begin?”

Those who defend the possibilities of multi-tasking insist we can hold more than one conversation at once. That we can use the pauses in one conversation to turn our attention to another, and then use the pauses in the second one to return to the first. Our smart phones encourage this idea, and sometimes in the simplest of exchanges, it might be possible. But anyone who has mistakenly replied with a text to the wrong person will recognize how easily we can forget to whom we are speaking, with sometimes embarrassing, or even harmful, effect.

The even greater loss of holding multiple conversations at once is this: we are no longer listening to what is communicated in the pauses; or to the unspoken truths beneath and sometimes beyond words; or to the messages of our own hearts as we receive messages from the hearts of others, which are often delivered nonverbally. Inasmuch as a true conversation is perhaps more about listening than speaking, to leave one conversation for another in the pauses between words renders us absent from some of the most important moments of an exchange.

Transitional ministry and Interim ministry surely involve conversations with both past and future. But how do we engage a whole community in just one conversation at a time, tending to its silences as well as its words? Listening is always the key. And pausing is a necessary first step to listening.

Some years ago, when working with a Buddhist sangha, I met weekly with a group of members in their sanctuary. Arriving in the building, I followed their practice of removing shoes at the door and then walked in my stocking feet to the sanctuary. At the sanctuary entrance, I found a beautiful, expansive threshold, a carved and polished piece of white pippy oak that was at least one foot deep. Honoring old teachings that warn against walking directly on a threshold, each week I entered the sanctuary with a ridiculously large step stretching across the wooden strip. But then I noticed, the sangha members all stepped squarely on the smooth wooden threshold as they entered. I asked the sangha founder about this, and he laughed at my wide steps. He told me the threshold was purposely deep to require that those entering would walk on it. It was a reminder, he said, delivered through the soles of the feet, that they were crossing a liminal threshold into sacred space, awakening an intention to be fully present.

I think of pauses in conversations as thresholds placed between words. Sometimes they are brief, and we cross them without noticing. But when they are too deep or wide to avoid, what invitation

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is lost by turning away and into another conversation instead of being present to what is being spoken in the silences of others and in our own hearts?

The writer Brenda Ueland, whose gift was one of words, once wisely wrote this about listening:

We should all know this: that listening, not talking, is the gifted and great role, and the imaginative role. And the true listener is much more beloved, magnetic than the talker, and ... is more effective and learns more and does more good....

In order to listen, here are some suggestions: Try to learn tranquility, to live in the present a part of the time every day. Sometimes say to yourself: "Now. What is happening now? This friend is talking. I am quiet. There is endless time. I hear it, every word." Then suddenly you begin to hear not only what people are saying, but also what they are trying to say, and you sense the whole truth about them. And you sense existence, not piecemeal, not this object and that, but as a translucent whole.¹

It is no secret that transitional ministry depends on listening. Both the minister's ability to listen to the congregation and the congregation's ability to listen to one another. It is also about pausing long enough between the "no longer" and the "not yet" to have one conversation at a time. To converse with the past truthfully and compassionately enough to bring closure before entering a new conversation with the future. This is not to say all conversations with the past must be ended before turning to the future. But each conversation must be given its due, allowing time to step fully into its fertile pauses speaking their own truths.

When I learned to walk on the threshold entering the sangha's sanctuary, it was not a place I lingered for more than one step. But it was liminal ground that spoke to me through the soles of my feet as I moved fully into the sacred space beyond it and as I later passed back out again.

Conversationally, in transitional ministry and in intentional interim ministry and in any time of great change, each pause that arises can be a similar invitation into or out of sacred exchange. The important practice is not stepping across or away from these pauses, but being fully present to them, receptive to all that they have to say.

Rev. Karen Hering recently served as interim associate minister at Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul, Minnesota, and is the author of [Trusting Change: Finding Our Way through Personal and Global Transformation](#) (Skinner House Press, 2022). The book names ten thresholding skills and offers reflections, writing prompts and embodied practices for pausing, listening and strengthening those skills in community.

¹ From a collection of her essays, "Strength To Your Sword Arm: Selected Writings by Brenda Ueland." Copyright 1992 by The Estate of Brenda Ueland, and posted on-line with permission from Holy Cow! Press, Duluth MN, at <http://traubman.igc.org/listenof.htm>