

Traveling Compassion: Crossing the threshold

My 10 year old niece and godchild, Malia, visited me from Ireland some months ago. It was her first trip to the United States. Ever since Hurricane Katrina, she anxiously plots any threat of a hurricane to our area on the internet. Obviously, she is concerned about my safety and wants her godfather to be safe in this hurricane zone.

During her visit, we drove around the area to view the aftermaths of Katrina. As she noticed the many empty lots where once stood a family home or the “for sale” signs in front yard, she was particularly fascinated by the numbers of steps that once led to a family’s home. She remarked that they were “stairways to nowhere.”

I was amazed at what struck her. Those of us who live here on a constant basis, pay no real attention to the many stairways to nowhere that dot our community. They just blend in with the ravaged landscape.

Malia’s observation gave me food for thought. I began to reflect on the importance of thresholds in our lives. Growing up in Ireland, one of the villages names, translated from the Irish, was “the village of many thresholds.” In that same village, before the Great Famine in the mid 1840’s and later the scourge of emigration, families lived in close proximity to each other. They were so close that their thresholds were so close to one another that you could step from one to another almost immediately.

Life is filled with thresholds. Within the grasp of winter is the threshold of spring. Within the seeds of spring is the threshold of sunny summer days. Within the lazy, hazy days of summer is the threshold of a nature shedding and preparing for winter. It seems everything is prepared. Nothing is rushed. Nothing is disjointed. Each has its own transitional threshold.

In the preface for the Dead, we are reminded that “Life is changed, not ended.” Yet, change is difficult for us. Often, it means leaving behind old patterns and ways to embrace new thresholds of opportunity. Sometimes, we are surprised by a change that is thrust upon us and one that we do not anticipate. As we cross each opportune threshold, we experience a flood of different emotions that reawaken, engage us and challenge us.

With the unveiling of each new horizon, we invoke new rituals to help us transition across the many transitions of life. Nature, society and church have their own rituals to help people with the transitions. During each threshold crossing, inner voices beckon us forward; inviting us to engage in a new experience at a new level. The transition may seem strange at first but, once crossed, it becomes a natural consequence. It feels like breaking in a new pair of shoes. The old ones may seem contoured and comfortable while the new ones seem so strange and foreign. Yet, time and the ritual of embracing the new, allow them to become familiar again, even for a short while until the next threshold.

Crossing a threshold always demands courage and a sense of trust because one never knows what challenges lie ahead. This is imperative when the new thresholds come upon us suddenly and we don’t have time to prepare. Sometimes, a sickness or an accident may thrust us over an unfamiliar threshold. One’s life before that crucial moment, was blessed, and now it seemed cursed.

Someone once said that “life is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived.” The script of our lives that leads us across the many transitions and thresholds of life are secret and known only to God. We have no choice but to trust a God who creates everything that is good. Then, no threshold we are asked to cross is a threat but rather is an invitation and a promise.

Now, when I ride around town and see the sets of stairs that dot empty lots, I will see them as threshold to somewhere special, planned by God.