

“Threshold Braking”

Message by Rev. Vincent Lachina

For Olympia UU Congregation 5-31-2020

My son tells me all the time that I drive like an old man. It's hard to defend that since I actually am an old man, but in truth, I'm glad to lay claim to that concept. I got my drivers license when I was 14 years old – it was the usual thing in Mississippi where I grew up. And I was tremendously proud to say in all those years, I had never had a ticket or an accident. That is, until last year. I had rented a car for the drive to Spokane for the UU General Assembly and was trying so hard to set the cruise control and not paying attention to the speedometer. Just past Ellensburg, the blue lights flashed, I got pulled over, and fined \$156 for driving 82 in a 70 miles per hour zone. My first ticket ever, and I blame the UUA for that and think they should reimburse me. One time I drive like a teenager and I pay for it.

Each of us who do drive have had at some point driving lessons. My own drivers ed classes came flashing back to me when I learned that the UU theme for May is “Thresholds.” I almost instantly recalled the emphasis that was placed on the concept of “Threshold Braking” by my instructor. We probably don't think much about the science of applying brakes in our vehicles, but there is a very real principle involving how we mash down on the pedal. That is the principle of threshold braking.

Today, cars are equipped with an ABS system, or automatic braking system. When we slam on the brakes

for any sudden need, the wheels of our cars will automatically lock bringing the car to a screeching stop. That is surely one example of threshold braking. It doesn't always mean that you will come to an uneventful stop, nor that you might not slam into the rear end of the car ahead of you. Driving the I-5 interstate every day for my daily commute to my office (when I did work onsite), I saw at least one rear-ending every day, usually caused by tailgating. There were few days that were the exception.

But I also witness cautious drivers who apply their brakes slowly and with purpose as they approach a traffic light or round-about. This art of slowing down by applying brake force at an optimal level is also an example of threshold braking. So, what does this have to do with our lives outside of a vehicle? How does the concept of threshold braking apply to each of us?

First, we need to define the word "threshold." Do you remember the old days before the internet, Google or Wikipedia when we actually held a dictionary in our hands and looked up words? Today if you asked most young people, they would have no clue what Merriam Webster is. It still exists – online, of course. And here is what the definitions for "threshold" are:

- ✓ The plank, stone or piece of timber that lies under a door or sill
- ✓ Boundary, like the end of a runway
- ✓ A level, point, or value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not
- And
- ✓ A point or place of beginning or entering

For our focus today, let's zero in on the last option – a point or place of beginning or entering.

Our lives are full of beginnings. From birth we begin a constant routine of facing new beginnings and challenges. When an infant begins to walk – and get into far too many things a child shouldn't. When we start our education – the first day in kindergarten or school. When we enter puberty and begin the process of moving from child to adolescent. When we graduate from high school and must decide what we will do as a young adult. When we think we have found true love which often leads to marriage. When we begin a career. When we establish friendships. When we join a church and become a part of a faith community. I could go on and on, but I think you get the picture. Life is about beginnings and entering.

It's how we approach each of these life events that connects us to the concept of threshold braking. It merits the question, do we come to a threshold, put the pedal to the metal and fly into the experience without ever finding a foot on the brakes? Do we come to the threshold, experience fear or anxiety and then slam on the brakes and hope our human ABS works. Or do we use a more practical approach while maintaining a braking force at the optimal and thoughtful level.

Suppose you are driving along and nearing an intersection when the traffic light changes to yellow. You have to decide what to do – floor it and speed through or mash on the brakes and come to a stop as quickly as you can. Are our life decisions and beginnings anything like that at all? Sometimes. Perhaps you're driving along just a tad above

the speed limit when the car behind you begins to flash its lights wanting you to speed up or move over. What do you do? In life, there are times when others want us to quickly make decisions concerning a beginning or an entering into a new experience. We are forced to decide how we engage in threshold braking.

Ironically, these concepts do not only apply to individuals, but to groups – even churches and congregations. Circumstance may arise without notice that cause faith communities to quickly decide what method of threshold braking is best. It's not a surprise that when a shut down order comes from government because of a virus pandemic and the doors of the church are closed, we crossed a threshold at the speed of light. There was no time for threshold braking. My Baby Boomer Generation overnight became the Baby Zoomer Generation. Necessity dictated that we slowly apply our threshold brakes and drive with caution and intention, and we learned a whole new concept of the meaning of "church."

Our world today is changing dramatically every day, and we are constantly at the threshold of new beginnings. I don't know about you, but my life has been turned upside down. I spend time daily trying to decide which pedal to mash with my foot, the brakes or the accelerator. I would have never imagined that some 50 years into ministry I would be delivering a message on the internet, sitting at home staring into a computer camera. I would have never imagined that I would be offering pastoral care to a hospital patient by phone. I would have never imagined that I would officiate at a wedding with only the couple present and the witnesses watching from a computer screen. Or I

would have never imagined that I would stand at a graveside with the wife and son of a man who had died from the virus and not other family could be present.

These beginnings or changes are new to me and I must spend time with each trying to find the best way through the entrances. And now we are all at a new threshold in our country with the deaths of innocent people, massive protests that turn violent, and fear in abundance for all of us. Individuals and congregations are going to be required to determine how to face these new thresholds and how to engage in threshold braking. I wish I had the answers for you, but I don't. It's uncharted territory.

Each of us must find the answers to the questions that circulate in our heads and hearts - how do I make a difference in my world now. In 1965 as a college student in Birmingham, Alabama, I watched the television news broadcast of Sheriff Bull Conner turning hoses and attack dogs on crowds of Black youth who were protesting the arrest of Dr. King. I watched George Wallace stand in the doorway of the University of Alabama to block the entry of a Black student. I watched as crowds attacked marchers crossing the Pettus Bridge in Selma trying to make their way to Montgomery. I read of the murder of Viola Liuzzo and others who had simply come South to stand with the Black community. And I sat in my theology class at a Baptist college and listened while my professor said, "All we can do is pray." That was one of the most blatant examples of threshold braking I can remember - slamming of brakes that stopped at the entrance and did nothing.

Ours is a new threshold. How we approach it is totally up to us - full speed ahead, purposeful braking, or activating our ABS when we slam on brakes. Individuals and congregations must make those choices. Let me close by offering one word of wisdom I learned back in the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's. Only praying about it won't get anything done. It's a nice thought, but it's not enough. It never has been. It never will be.

Amen

*Message delivered May 31, 2020 for Olympia Unitarian
Universalist Church*