

Blessing the Threshold: Crossing into a New Season with Gratitude

Welcome & Opening Words

Greetings, and welcome to Westminster Unitarian Church! I am Rev Shelley Dungan, an ordained interfaith minister from One Spirit Seminary, a member of this church and **your guide and practice leader** for the morning.

Memorial Day weekend is the final summer service before our church year programming begins next Sunday with our **in-gathering water communion**. Next week we move to **2 services** - 9:00 reflective and 10:30 traditional.

A few weeks ago I offered to lead this service because **I knew I needed a ritual**. I needed to pause, to **thank summer** for its gifts, and to **prepare my own heart** for the season of cooler days and longer nights. I pray this service helps you do the same.

I wonder specifically **what brought you here** on a holiday weekend?... Perhaps you also felt the need for a **space to pause and reflect**? To **acknowledge the passing of time** and to be invited into some heart-centered time? Perhaps you need some spiritual community? Whatever the reason, I am so glad you've chosen to be here.

Let's begin by **greeting one another**. Simply look around and offer a smile or a nod. Or *Namaste* if it feels authentic.....

Now I invite you to **relax**, take a few slow breaths, and allow yourself to **rest comfortably** as you arrive more fully into the present moment.

One of the things I love about being part of this community is that it has given me a **spiritual home where all the sacred streams** that have nourished my own life are welcomed and honored. I also feel like all the parts of me, past, present and future are welcomed. Here at Westminster, we are a community of people from **many backgrounds**, beliefs, and life experiences, united **not by a single creed**, but by **shared values**—with **Love at the center... I hope you will be able to feel the love this morning!**

You might notice in this service that we draw from many sources and traditions. There will be the use of poetry, a contemplative Christian practice, some sacred mantras, a hymn, a love song, reflective listening, silence, and perhaps most importantly, our own lived experience.

If you're visiting with us this morning, we're especially glad you're here. We hope you'll stay after the service for coffee and conversation in Smith Hall so we can get to know you.

And now let us turn our hearts and minds to worship

Chalice Lighting

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition we begin our worship services by lighting a chalice. The chalice is our **symbol of the abiding love** that is at the center of our faith and its light shines as a beacon for all to know that they have a **safe and welcoming home here**. Let us light our chalice this morning with these words by Frederick Buechner

"Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness:

touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."

Unison Affir-

"Love is the spirit of this church and service our mission, this is our great covenant, to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love and help one another"

You may be seated

Call for the Offering Each month our Social Economic and Environmental Justice committee chooses a **values aligned organization as our justice partner**. This month we are proud to join forces with Sharing Locker - one of Westminster's community outreach ministries. Here to tell you a little more about the Sharing Locker is Allie DeLong.

We invite you to support their work through action and donation as you are able.

the morning offering will now be generously given and gratefully received

Greg instrumental

Minister's Reflection/Sermon

Together let's bring to mind some **ordinary thresholds, transition points** that shape our lives. Go ahead and **Call out a few thresholds** off the top of your head...

waking up... beginning a meal... walking through a **doorway**- like entering this sanctuary ... meeting someone for the first time... the first day of school... beginning a new job...retiring **how about the place where one breath ends and the next one begins?**

Labor Day weekend, some would call this the official end of summer. After all, here in Rhode Island the **lifeguard stands** come down in a few days! How many are looking forward to having dogs allowed back on the beaches???

Well, maybe this is a good time to talk about attachments...

Does anyone else besides me tend to **cling to what they love**? To sometimes beg life for *just a little more*...?

As I mentioned earlier, I offered to lead this service because—I need this pause.

Something in my soul needs to bow to my beloved season of summer and prepare myself for the **bittersweet** transition into fall.

I have such strong, visceral, **romanticized**, emotionally-charged memories associated with summer... do you?

I grew up on the **Connecticut shoreline** in a large family that was in the business of selling sailboats and teaching others how to sail. We were like **nautical evangelists in docksiders and polo shirts**... All winter long we attracted potential boat customers with alluring images and stories of endless light and breezy summer days where one could sail with ease wherever the kind winds might take them...literally sailing off into the sunset!

And we four kids, along with my parents, were a **pretty persuasive crew** so **Business was good!**

As a child of summer, born at the tail end of July, the season has held many delights including the promise of an **intoxicating kind of freedom**: as a kid there was plenty of time to roam the marina docks, ride ponies in the fields near our home, play with neighborhood friends, jump on the trampoline for hours—feeling free as a bird.

As an adult, my summers became equally anticipated, coveted and precious. **I spent fifteen of them here in coastal Rhode Island at the Second Beach campground, living in an RV with my husband, Bruce, and our four children.**

There were summers full of boogie boards and shovels, and later on surfboards and wetsuits.

I relished my early-morning yoga practices on the beach and the **late-day shimmer** of sunlight on the water.

I remember strolling my babies along the beach at low tide and thinking, ***Does it get any better than this?***

And so many evenings ended with us yielding to the children's plea for a run to **Frosty Freeze** before they climbed into their bunks.

I imagine each of you could tell your own magical stories of summer...

Places you returned to....People you loved....Small rituals....Long lazy days...Something that tasted like freedom to you...

Many of us know the ancient words from Ecclesiastes:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.

And on some level, I accept that as undeniably true.

And yet, **I have discovered that I simply cannot let something precious go without stopping to say thank you.**

My parents were **big on proper manners - please and thank you and so on**—but what compels me now to offer thanks is something deeper than childhood conditioning. **If I don't thank or acknowledge a gift, something inside me feels unfinished.**

For decades, I have practiced pausing at thresholds with gratitude as a spiritual Awareness practice and encouraged others to do the same.

Sometimes it is as simple as stopping for **five breaths** between one segment of my day and the next.

Stopping. - Opening my senses. - Noticing. - **Feeling into this thing called life.**
With these pauses, I experience time differently, as though it is suspended from its usual rush forward.

This seemingly benign practice of pausing has actually transformed the way I move through my days. So much so that I began to wonder whether it might be **valuable for us to practice it together**—right here, at this Labor Day threshold.

And I have noticed something else.

There seems to be a relationship between pausing and gratitude.

I do not have to manufacture gratitude.

I do not have to tell myself I should be thankful.

When I stop—really stop—
look around,
look up,
breathe deeply...

gratitude finds me.

It is almost as though gratitude is already there, **waiting beneath the surface**, and rises whenever I slow down, soften my grip, open my awareness, and take in the life that is actually here.

Buddhist meditation teacher Tara Brach says:

*“Gratitude arises when we bring an open and full presence to our life, and its sweetness is a feeling of **homecoming**.”*

There is also something that **resonates deeply for me in the Celtic spiritual tradition**—in the way it honors both the rhythms of the Earth and the journey of the human soul.

Rev. Deborah often quotes John O'Donohue, and **another Celtic spiritual teacher** whose work I have come to appreciate is **Christine Valters Paintner**, and particularly her book **Sacred Time**.

She writes about **thresholds as doorways** into new ways of being and new seasons of life. She reminds us that when we pay attention to the turning of the seasons, we may begin to recognize those same rhythms within our own interior life. As she points out, we can practice noticing change....how One thing fades as another thing arises.

Thresholds invite us into what is sometimes called liminal space—the in-between place. It is often a place of some uncertainty.

These transitional places give us the opportunity to loosen our grip on old understandings or frameworks and make room to welcome what is next.

Major thresholds—birthdays, graduations, retirements, marriages, losses—may be **easy to recognize and we often have rituals to mark these**.

But our lives are filled with **smaller thresholds too**.

Most of them pass **unnoticed**.

Especially when we are rushing.

Yet these small crossings are part of the very fabric of our lives.

Taking time to pause, reflect, and pay attention can slow us down, giving us a chance to **savor our lives**—to notice the bigger picture unfolding.

This gathering, and every Sunday service is one of those invitations to pause. To stop. To notice. To remember. And, before crossing into whatever comes next...**and to say thank you.**

SONGS: Invocation: Gayatri Mantra

Come and Find the Quiet Center - sing it as a poem set to music

Come and find the, quiet center
in the crowded, life we lead,
find the room for, hope to enter,
find the frame where, we are freed:
clear the chaos, and the clutter,
clear our eyes, that we can see
all the things that, really matter,
be at peace, and simply be.

Silence is a, friend who claims us,
cools the heat, and slows the pace,
God it is who, speaks and names us,
knows our being, touches base,
making space with, in our thinking,
lifting shades to, show the sun,
raising courage, when we're shrinking,
finding scope for, faith begun.

In the Spirit, let us travel,
open to each, other's pain,
let our loves and, fears unravel,
celebrate the, space we gain:
there's a place for, deepest dreaming,
there's a time for, hearts to care,
in the Spirit's, lively scheming
there is always, room to spare!

Before we move into our time of deeper reflection, I want to share a few words from Wendell Berry, the poet, farmer, and environmental writer who died earlier this week at the age of 92.

Berry spent much of his life paying attention to the relationship between the human spirit and the natural world.

In his poem ***The Peace of Wild Things***, he describes what happens when he steps away from fear about what lies ahead and allows the natural world to return him to the present moment.

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

Joys & Sorrows

Song, Set a Fire

No Place I'd Rather Be (3X)
Than here in this Love,
Here in this Love.

Set a fire down in my soul

That I can't contain and I can't
control

I want more of you God. 2X

Alt:

I want more of this Love 2X

Guided Reflection Threshold Practice - Lectio

Start with body awareness, sinking more deeply into the present moment with breath, posture, senses, creating the conditions for listening and reflecting....

I'd like to invite us into a contemplative practice that has nourished me for many years. We will pair Lectio Divina—"sacred reading with personal reflection. Lectio Divina emerged within the Christian monastic tradition, yet its invitation is beautifully universal: the practice is simply to listen with an open heart and curious mind.

I have selected 2 passages for this morning. The first is associated with Summer and will prepare us to reflect on our own lived experience of this past summer. The second is associated with the new season that is coming.

In today's practice I'll read each passage **once** slowly followed by some reflection questions. When time allows, it is customary to read it 3 X.

The invitation is to notice how the passage makes you **feel**, see if there is a **word or phrase that shimmers** or catches your attention and be **curious if there is a message or invitation** for you that the piece reveals.

There's no need to search for anything dramatic. Simply notice what comes. And if nothing particular arises, that's perfectly fine too. The practice is simply to listen with your full attention. You will not be asked to share any of your thoughts. This is just for you.

Passage #1 - The Summer Day - by the late and beloved Mary Oliver-

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean –

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

5 breaths

Now allow your attention to drift gently through the past few months.

*What were the gifts of this summer? **3 breath pause!***

Perhaps moments of delight...moments of awe...Moments of freedom...

*unexpected kindness...or laughter that still warms your heart. **3 breaths***

*Perhaps there were disappointments...losses...or challenges that quietly
asked more of you than you thought you had to give. **3 breaths***

*In yoga there is a beautiful word... **Santosh**... contentment...enoughness.*

*Not pretending that everything was perfect. Simply that this season,
exactly as it unfolded, had something valuable to offer.*

*Can you whisper an **inner "thank you"** to whatever is arising?*

Not because every moment was easy...

*but because every moment has become part of your life. **5 breaths***

Then, very gently...

Begin returning your awareness to
this room.

Feel your feet resting on the floor.

Feel the support of your chair.

Notice this breath.

Notice this moment.

Thank you summer!

Passage Two — Looking Ahead with Welcome

Now we'll listen once more... for a feeling, a word or phrase that shimmers, for a message or invitation

This time, allow your attention to turn toward the season that is waiting to unfold.

Summer's Threshold - By an anonymous author

Late summer invites us to loosen our grip.

To hold what remains of the day's warmth with open palms.

The tomatoes are ripening...Some even release themselves from the vine, knowing their ripeness is now full.

Meanwhile the pumpkins continue their expansion.

The hydrangeas are fading from bright blue to dusty silver.

The leaves are a little dryer and have a different rustle as the wind blows through the trees.

The crickets sing a little louder in the evening and grass does not grow as quickly as before.

The morning air hints at the coming change.

Sunset comes earlier as do thoughts of dinner.

Nature does not hurry nor does she ask us to rush forward.

Instead the Earth invites us to pay attention and be willing to be delighted or even astonished.

The earth turns and the seasons change at a pace set long before our species emerged.

All that is unfolding is ours to revel in.

To say "welcome" is how we extend a hand toward a grace-filled future.

Pause

*Now allow your thoughts to drift gently toward the weeks ahead. What hopes are quietly beginning to emerge? **3 breaths***

What new beginning may be waiting?

*Is there something you are ready to welcome? **3 breaths***

*Perhaps there is also something you are ready to release. **3 breaths***

As autumn slowly approaches, can you meet it with curiosity... rather than hurry? Can you meet it with openness... rather than demanding certainty?

*Can you whisper an inner..."Welcome.?" **3 breaths***

Then...

Take one deeper breath.

Gently wiggle your fingers...

your toes...

And when you're ready... allow your eyes to open.

THRESHOLD CALL AND RESPONSE

We will integrate both of these reflections, past and future into one present moment Call and response....

Part 1

Leader: For this breath and every breath—

All: Thank you.

Leader: For the gift of this precious day—

All: Thank you.

Leader: For this ever-changing body—

All: Thank you.

Leader: For time in summer's warmth—

All: Thank you.

Leader: For the balmy starry nights—

All: Thank you.

Leader: For abundant gardens and sandy beaches...

All: Thank you.

Leader: For birdsong and crickets...

All: Thank you.

Leader: For love of family and chosen family...

All: Thank you.

Leader: For laughter...

All: Thank you.

Leader: For tears...

All: Thank you.

Leader: For what delighted us...

All: Thank you.

Leader: For what stretched us...

All: Thank you.

Leader: For the gift of mindful awareness...

All: Thank you.

Silence

Part 2 — Crossing the Threshold -

Leader: To nature's new season—

All: WELCOME

Leader: To new beginnings—

All: WELCOME

Leader: To the lessons ahead —

All: WELCOME.

Leader: To the grace to let go—

All: WELCOME.

Leader: To the surprises that await us—

All: WELCOME.

Leader: To the beauty we can not yet imagine—

All: WELCOME.

Leader: To friendships waiting to deepen—

All: WELCOME.

Leader: To the courage that will be there when we need it—

All: WELCOME.

Leader: To the joy wherever we find it—

All: WELCOME.

Leader: To the opportunities for service—

All: WELCOME.

Leader: To the continuation of this one precious life—

All: WELCOME.

SILENCE

That silence may become one of the holiest moments of the morning.

Closing Song: Om Mani/Lokah -

Meditative prep - Hands to heart, Om Mani is a prayer to our own heart, to shine strong and bright, Lokah a prayer for the world

Closing Prayer

borrowing from the St. Patrick

May you know Love beneath you...

Love before you...

Love behind you...

Love above you...

Love within you...

And may gratitude arise whenever you take time to pause

Join hands. Mention kirtan tonight @5:00

Carry the Flame

Extinguishing the Chalice