

The Contemplative Practice of Crossing the Threshold

Lea Carla Abrams

E-mail: leacarlaabrams@gmail.com

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Abstract

The practice of Crossing the Threshold is a contemplative practice that can be a beneficial part of any SEL program. This practice involves teaching students how to respond and contribute to the energy of the spaces they move through during the school day. Crossing the Threshold can also have a profound effect on how students fully engage with school life. This article explores the experience of Ethan, a four-year-old, who experiments with the threshold over time in order to enter the classroom space with confidence and enthusiasm. The author then discusses the effects of bringing this contemplative practice into other school settings. The awareness of moving across thresholds from one space to another had a profound effect on her students. Their ability to be present and to self-regulate behaviors was just two of the outcomes of this practice. The author concludes that the contemplative practice of Crossing the Threshold would be a beneficial addition to any SEL program.

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My introduction to the contemplative concept of The Threshold came when I was a Waldorf early childhood teacher. I learned that spaces contain certain energies and that crossing from one space into another was also a crossing between energies. Not only does space contain energy, but people bring their own energies into spaces which, in turn, affects the energy of the space and the experience people have in that space. So, there is a certain energy given to a space as well as an energetic receptivity, which allows the energy to change. The Threshold is the space

between spaces, the space between differing, and often, conflicting energies. The Threshold represents that moment when change can occur. I say can, because it requires contemplative attention in order to recognize this moment and either sensitize yourself to the change or prepare yourself to make a change.

As a Waldorf early childhood teacher, contemplation was an essential part of my teaching day. While other teachers were making copies or having early morning meetings, I was

sitting quietly, envisioning each child, and creating intentions for the day. Every night before bed, I would also envision each child and set intentions for the following day. For me, contemplation was preparation. This has always been the most important aspect of my teaching life and was a practice that stayed with me throughout my forty-year teaching career.

Part of my contemplative teaching approach was to be aware of the energy I created in the classroom before my students arrived so that they would enter a space of intentional energy that contained both peace and possibility. I spoke with parents about this concept, so they understood that the classroom energy was intended for their children alone and that goodbyes happened on the "other side." Students stepped into the space with independence and anticipation. I began to find that this simple concept was both sacred and powerful.

During the school day, as I moved the children from the inside classroom space to the enclosed porch space, with its own particular energy, to the outdoor space and back, I started to experience the thresholds between these spaces as opportunities for change that seemed almost transformative. One child, in particular, stood out in this experience. I will call him Ethan. Ethan came to my little school with intense trepidation. He was hesitant, afraid, and quite attached to his mother. He was a highly sensitive little boy, and I knew this when I saw how he seemed to intuitively know that crossing a threshold was a big deal. He came across the threshold between the outside and the enclosed porch in the oddest way. His body went limp and his mother gently dragged him onto the porch. Even his face went limp. He was expressionless. Once on the porch, Ethan clung to his mother. His big blue eyes were

wide open and his gaze darted around more with fear than with curiosity. Ethan refused to cross that next threshold, from the porch into the classroom. He watched, still clinging to his mother, as the other children crossed over into the room, but he would not budge.

Ethan's mother and I decided that she would stay with him that day, on the porch, until he was ready to enter the classroom space. He was never ready. After an hour or so they left. But his mom was determined to help him across that threshold, so they returned the following day and the day after that and for the whole week Ethan was never ready to cross that threshold. However, by day five he was ready to leave his mother's side and look through the closed window from the porch into the classroom to watch the children playing. He did this as long as nobody looked at him. As soon as that happened, he ran back to his mother.

Ethan and his mom returned the second week and for the first few days he did the same gazing through the window. By the middle of the week, Ethan was no longer at his mother's side and was able to cross the threshold from outside to the porch on his own and with determination. He went right to the window and stayed there throughout the school morning. He started making eye contact with the children at play, although, as children tend to do, Ethan's presence on the other side of the window became routine and they rarely paid attention to him. His mother and I decided that we would try having her leave and allow Ethan to stay on the porch on his own. By the third week, Ethan was fine with this new arrangement, each day walking onto the porch by himself and watching through the window. He began joining the group when we went outside, only to take up his position at the porch window

when we returned. Until, one day. Ethan walked onto the porch and put his toes on the threshold between the porch and the classroom. He kept his foot there for a few moments. I allowed the door to stay open that morning so he could continue to engage with the threshold.

During these few weeks, Ethan had not uttered a sound. As he explored the threshold, he started standing on top of it with both feet. As if emboldened by this act he began jumping on to the threshold and off backward, back onto the porch. He would make eye contact with me when he did this. I began to notice subtle and not so subtle changes in his energy as he went from gazing through the window to standing on the threshold to jumping. And then one day, he jumped inside. He stood there for a moment a bit dazed as if he could not quite believe what he had done. And, as if a fog lifted, Ethan's energy changed. "Hi," he said to the children and they immediately invited him to get in their pretend boat and engage in the drama they were creating about sailing away from a house that was on fire. Ethan jumped into the boat and started yelling, "Fire!" From that moment on, Ethan was fully present. He did not start talking or jumping or playing until he walked over that threshold. But he did every time. That threshold was the gateway to a new world for Ethan, and I realized then, how powerful the space between spaces could be.

As I continued my teaching journey and moved into different school settings, I brought the contemplative power of The Threshold with me. Although I discovered programs for helping students acclimate to school routines and expectations, I continually found them to be simplistic and primarily focused on changing and reinforcing explicit behaviors. Attention to the more subtle energies and practices that can shift

behaviors in, what I experienced to be, a more permanent and profound way were lacking. These programs often produced behavior change but, in my view, primarily out of compliance. By allowing Ethan to acclimate and cross the threshold, in his own way and his own time, he was able to fully open up in a joyful way, participate and experience a full sense of belonging. I wanted that for all my students and in all the school settings in which I found myself.

So, I did what I knew and felt deeply in my heart, was right. Although I found myself in schools that had adopted school-wide behavioral and SEL programs, I added in the concept of Crossing The Threshold. I did this in a variety of ways. In the first few weeks of school, as students were learning routines, expectations, and the school's Core Values, I introduced The Threshold and what it represented. I would take my class on walks through the school experimenting with preparing our energy to shift from one space to another. We would stop at a door to a new space and practice this by breathing, closing our eyes and imagining the space we were about to enter. We would move into the new space and express this new energy in our bodies. For example, when we moved from the hallway into the gym we would run and open our arms to express that joy of movement and spaciousness. When moving from the stairwell into the library we would quiet our minds and bodies and move into the library space with both stillness and readiness for experiencing wonder. It was magic. Students loved this new way of experiencing changes in their environment. They intuitively seemed to understand that they were both entering spaces with certain energies as well as bringing their own energies into spaces. This gave students a sense of control and self-efficacy over their actions and behaviors.

As we sat in weekly circles, discussing our experiences of moving across The Threshold and tuning into the energy of the moment, students talked about the impact of this new practice. I recorded their responses and would put them up on our wall so we could ponder them over the course of the following week until our next circle discussion. Almost all responses were positive and thoughtful. What I witnessed was, like with Ethan, a joyful acceptance of this practice. After several weeks I no longer had to say a thing. Teachers and other students commented on how quiet and well behaved my students were. We would talk about this, as if it was our own private little joke. None of us were focused on being quiet or well-behaved. We were focused on the energies of spaces and the energies we brought into spaces. We would laugh about this, as if we were pulling the wool over the eyes of our friends in other classes. I would overhear my students trying to explain what we were really doing to these friends. "It's about being mindful." "It feels really good and prepares you for what you're going to do next." "I like it because I feel good about myself when I do it." "Teachers love it 'cause they don't have to tell you what to do when you go to their classes." These were just some of what I overheard my students say.

How can we help our colleagues and administrators understand that a practice like Crossing the Threshold can be a part of any behavioral or SEL program? It is clear to me that this contemplative practice teaches students to be present and to self-regulate behavior. How can we demonstrate that this is worth trying, that students respond to it wholeheartedly because it gives them a sense of control and purpose? Many schools are starting to adopt practices such as this, and I am heartened by it.

Although I have retired from school life, I look back on these experiences and especially to my first experience with Ethan. When we bring patience, when we slow down our expectations and when we allow a child to find their own path, they will eventually cross that threshold because they have decided it is worth it. I believe when we, as their teachers, parents, and counselors, hold that intention for them, prepare school spaces with this intention in mind and understand the power of The Threshold for supporting positive change and growth, we are helping our children move through our world with greater joy, agency and purpose.

Author Acknowledgement

Lea Carla Abrams is an educator, writer and poet. Her experience spans from early childhood and K-12, to the college and graduate level. She has served as a teacher, counselor, coach and division head in Waldorf, progressive and independent schools for 40 years. Lea has written curriculum and taught writing to children as well as to educators. As a mindfulness instructor, she has brought mindfulness programs into both schools and non-profit organizations. She presently serves as a consultant bringing mindfulness, SEL and racial justice initiatives to schools. She uses poetry as a catalyst for authentic change, and uses music, art and dance to create powerfully integrated learning experiences. She serves as an active member of TEL, an organization committed to transformational educational leadership, as well as a facilitator for Millennium Forum, which is an organization that conducts circles of growth and trust for teachers and educational leaders. Currently, Lea is working on a book of her poems and writing a memoir of her grandmother. She is a mother, grandmother, cat lover and beach and

nature lover. Practicing loving kindness and engaging in authentic relationships is her goal each day, wherever she happens to be at any given moment. Lea can be reached at leacarlaabrams@gmail.com