



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Unitarians live in a parallel universe

Clay Nelson © 21 March 2021

From my experience, one of the most difficult things to do in life is to cross a threshold. I would like to be able to claim that I do so bravely and boldly. Sadly, human frailty being what it is, that has often not been the case. Sometimes it has required tornado public transport to move me from Kansas to Oz. Sometimes I have crossed by accident while playing hide and seek with myself and my fears in the back of a wardrobe.

The problem with thresholds is there is only one thing to expect — the unexpected. Such is the nature of parallel universes to which we might venture. You never know what or who will greet you on the other side. Will it be a joyfully singing munchkin choir and a good witch bearing a gift of ruby slippers or Mr Tumnus the faun under a lamp post, who catches humans for the evil White Witch in a land where it is always winter and never Christmas.

While I don't want to send you, our new members, scrambling for the exits, it is only fair to warn you that signing the membership book is a threshold event. It is a ticket of admittance to a parallel universe. This isn't purely a ritual that can be forgotten tomorrow. Everything changes for you and also for us. You and we have to reconsider who we are now, for we certainly aren't the same as we were yesterday. We aren't unfamiliar with the task. A couple welcoming their first child into the world spend a lot of time considering this question. Losing a parent, adopting a puppy, changing careers, moving to a new town, and the list goes on and on. Each of these occasions is preceded by expectations. Instead the unexpected shows up. It can be a little unnerving. On a good day I turn to one of my sources of wisdom, writer [Rainer Maria Rilke and his *Letters to a Young Poet*](#):

I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. and the point is, to live everything. live the questions now. perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

The key to entering a threshold is to live the questions it presents.

Perhaps, sharing the last set of thresholds I have had to cross will make my point clearer. I confess to feeling vulnerable doing so.

When I turned 65 social expectations were pushing me to go through a threshold called retirement. I did want to go because the Anglican church I served at the time was under new management intent to meet the bishop's expectation of stamping out the heresies I had planted there. When the congregation's hope that I would become the new vicar were foiled, it fractured further my relations with my partner at the time — a relationship that would eventually crumple under the weight of it. When it crumpled so did my support system. So, I did want to go. And no, I did not want to go. It was a community I loved. It had been a time of immense growth for me. It turns out I thrive in notoriety. I didn't have to leave and yet I had to, albeit with feelings overwhelmed by grief. That threshold led to the next. I really did not want to retire and so I knocked on the Auckland Unitarian door instead. I had lots of questions about doing so, but it was time to live them. I was warmly welcomed in.

Not surprisingly I didn't quite know what knocking on the door would require. It turns out there is a world of difference between being an Anglican priest and a Unitarian minister. Just being heretical wasn't going to cut it. Unitarians had been challenging doctrine and dogma from day one. I was going to have to let go of the trappings of priesthood that had contributed to my authority. My favourite rituals would need to be put aside. My beautiful vestments relegated to the back of the wardrobe. I had to learn to watch my language. No not cursing, but words that trigger victims of toxic Christianity or stop rationalists from hearing me. Words like God, church and prayer. I had to learn how to create a worship experience without my usual tools for doing so. I had lots of questions about what that would look like. As the services evolved I did decide to keep wearing this small piece of plastic in my collar. Partly as an act of rebellion and partly as a reminder of where my journey began.

Ultimately, I had to learn how to contribute to this faith community in a whole new way. My task was to be a catalyst. A catalyst is an active, but unobtrusive participant in a group, keeping them moving towards their mission, their kaupapa, but not dominating them. A catalyst is an example of our principles, leading others through carefully considered action. A catalyst remembers that no matter what their role they will eventually be gone, leaving no trace except a beloved community full of people like you who have declared their intentions to enter a parallel universe by signing the membership book. It has been a source of true joy to watch this community enter threshold after threshold, to live out your questions about how to embody your faith in your homes, at work and in the community.

It turns out we are all catalysts if we live these five questions on crossing the threshold suggested by [Quaker educator and activist, Palmer J Parker](#):

- How can I let go of my need for fixed answers in favour of aliveness?
- What is my next change in daring to be human?
- How can I open myself to the beauty of nature and human nature?
- Who or what do I need to learn to love next? And next? And next?
- What is the new creation that wants to be born in and through me?

When we live these questions, the answers elude us, leaving us uncertain at the threshold. If we are ever going to find answers we have to enter the universe parallel to the one we have been in. Anne Hillman in her poem "We look with uncertainty" offers a reason to do so:

We look with uncertainty
beyond the old choices for
clear-cut answers
to a softer, more permeable aliveness
which is every moment
at the brink of death;
for something new is being born in us
if we but let it.

We stand at a new doorway,
awaiting that which comes...
daring to be human creatures,
vulnerable to the beauty of existence.
Learning to love.

[*Awakening the Energies of Love*](#)

Meditation / Conversation starter:

How has being a Unitarian changed your life, purpose and meaning?