

Threshold Leadership

On leading from the place between what was and what comes next.

By Bryce Thomason · September 7, 2026 · 11 min read



I learned the first rule of my life in Bradford, Arkansas, a town with one four-way stop, more than twenty churches, a law against public dancing, and twenty-six people in my graduating class. The rule was simple. If I worked hard enough, I would be safe.

I needed that rule. We were poor, and I knew by the fifth grade that I was gay, in the early 1980s, in a dry county where the only thing anyone said about people like me came from a pulpit and was not kind. So I built a mask out of achievement, because achievement was the one mask nobody questioned. Medals. Newspaper mentions. A television interview or two. I said it in front of an audience a few years ago: if I added enough glitter, my secrets were safe.

The rule worked. That is the part nobody warns you about. I founded five companies and built them to more than twenty million dollars in revenue combined without a dime of outside money. I flew at the front of the plane, carried a black American Express Centurion card, and had season tickets on the baseline at NBA games. A boy from Bradford had done the thing, and the thing was supposed to feel like arriving.

None of it made me happy.

I want to be careful with that sentence, because it has become a kind of cliché, the successful person confessing that success is hollow. That is not what I mean. I mean something more specific and more embarrassing. The urgency that got me out of poverty never got the message that I was out. It kept running. It ran through every company, every relationship, every room I walked into with

my chest already lifted and my breath already shallow, until somewhere along the way it stopped feeling like a strategy and started feeling like me.

I could tell that the way I was living and leading could not continue as it was. What I could not see was anything on the other side of it. I had spent my whole life learning to get across hard places fast, and I had arrived at one with no far side.

I did not have the word for that stretch then. I have it now.

The place you are not meant to stay

Threshold.

A threshold is the strip of stone or wood at the bottom of a doorway. It is not a room. Nothing is arranged there, nothing is finished, and you are not meant to stay. You cross it. Anthropologists borrowed the Latin word for it a century ago for the middle of every rite of passage: the separation from what was, the passage where the old rules no longer hold, and the return with a new standing. The middle is the part nobody photographs. It is also the part that does the work.

For most of my life I treated thresholds as a problem of speed. The old way is over. Fine. Find the new way, and find it now. What I understand now is that a threshold cannot be crossed fast, because the thing that has to change on a threshold is not your circumstances. It is you. And you cannot perform that. I had performed everything else.

That is why I hated them. It is also why I have come to believe that leading well from a threshold is the deepest work a leader is ever asked to do, and the work almost none of us were taught.

A phone call in 2010

The largest of them came by phone.

In 2010 I was living in Fort Lauderdale. My best friend Shannon and I had moved our company there from Los Angeles, and we had built a life around it: a business that was thriving, a chosen family, plans. I was a week away from closing on my dream house in Victoria Park. I thought the music had been written, and all I had to do was keep following the score.

Shannon and I were in Missouri on business when the call came. Shannon's partner and my friend had been killed.

I am not going to write about how he died. I am going to write about what I did, because it is the truest example I have of everything this essay is about. I did not mourn. I became the rock. I held Shannon, and the extended family, and the company, and I did it as pure logistics: flights, phone calls, arrangements, decisions, one after another, for months. Within six months we had moved the company, and each other, to Atlanta and started over. At the time I would have called that leadership, and some of it was. But I know now that I sprinted across the largest threshold of my life because standing on it was more than I could bear, and I know it because sixteen years later I am still learning how to grieve a friend I held everyone else through losing. The ten minutes I cried after the funeral were all the permission I could find.

A threshold does not go away because you crossed it fast. It waits. Whatever you did not stand still for, you carry, and you carry it into every threshold that comes after. Atlanta gave me a new composition: a congregation, a son, a partner I did not see coming. It also gave me a decade of leading from a place I had not finished standing in.

A couch in 2019

In 2019 the congregation I now serve asked me to become its next president. Instead of saying "yes," I asked to think about it and then I did something I had never done at the front door of any leadership role in my life. I asked to sit down with the senior minister, and I told her the one thing about my past that I was certain could end it all before it began. A chapter of my own life, older than any of this, that I had carried in shame for twenty years, buried under all that glitter.

I braced. I had rehearsed rejection so many times over the decades that my body knew the shape of it before it arrived.

She asked me one question that I answered honestly. And then she blessed me, and the wall I had spent twenty years building turned out to be mine. Nobody on the other side of it had been holding it

up.

It had happened before, in every room where I came out as gay and was received as I am, and I had somehow never learned the lesson. I learned it on that couch in her office. Nothing on a threshold moves until someone tells the truth about where they actually are, and the leader has to go first.

And then the score blew away

A few months later the world shut down. The plan for me to serve as president was set aside, and the senior minister asked me instead to come on staff and help the congregation through what was coming. My first day as executive director was April 1, 2020. The score we had been following scattered like sheet music in the wind.

That congregation already knew what a threshold felt like. In March 2018 it had voted to sell the building that had been its home for fifty-two years, and it had spent the time since in a rented office park we called the treehouse, for the branches you could see between the metal blinds. Four years without a home. A different senior minister, twelve years in the pulpit, departed in the middle of it. A fundraising firm ran a feasibility study and told us we would fall far short of what the renovation needed. Then a pandemic on top of all of it.

The sprint and the pretend

I watched a community stand on a threshold for four years, and I learned the two things people do there, because I did both of them.

The first is the sprint. Announce the new plan. Name the new structure. Fill the silence with a direction, any direction, because a leader with a direction is easier to follow than a leader standing still. The trouble is that a plan announced from a threshold is usually a plan for leaving the threshold, not a plan for what is on the other side. People can tell. They nod, and they wait.

The second is the pretend. Keep running the old way, only harder. Treat the ending as a rough patch. This one is quieter and costs more, because everyone around you already knows what has ended. When the leader will not say it, they learn that the truth is not welcome yet, and they stop bringing it.

My version was the sprint. I could not stand on the sill, so I filled it with motion. In an earlier essay I wrote about the cost of being the only one who can do it. This is where that habit began.

Standing still on a threshold felt to me like disappearing. I had believed, since Bradford, that worth had to be performed before it could be possessed, and a threshold is the one place in a leader's life where there is nothing to perform. There is only you, and the truth about where you are, and the people watching to see whether you will say it.

What does it mean to lead at a threshold?

Threshold leadership is leading in the stretch between an ending and a beginning, when the old way has stopped working and the new way is not yet clear. It means saying plainly what has ended, refusing to fill the gap with a plan just to have one, and making only the decisions the moment asks for.

Here is what it took, when we finally did it. The plan is not what carried us. What carried us was a community that stopped pretending the old home was coming back, and stopped sprinting toward a new one before it was real, and stood for a while in an office park telling each other the truth about what had ended. Out of that, in the middle of a pandemic, we raised more than four million dollars, well past what the feasibility study had projected, and in 2022 we walked into a home. I have never felt more alive than I did the day those doors opened, and I have thought a great deal about why. It was not the building. It was that a whole community had stood on a threshold without lying to itself, and come through.

This is a story about a pattern so common we mistake it for leadership, and about what becomes possible when a leader sets it down.

What found me on a hill

I would like to tell you I set the pattern down through discipline. I did not. It was set down for me, in a place where there was nothing to perform.

In November of last year, I spent two days on a hill in North Carolina that is bound up with Doug Silsbee. He founded the school of coaching I have spent the past year training in, and he died before I ever found it. I went up that hill with a journal and no plan and sat in silence for hours, past the antsy first hour, past the second, until something in me stopped waiting for the next thing to do. And then a man who had not drawn anything in decades started drawing. Then he wrote a poem. I do not believe in ghosts. I believe a life can saturate a place, and that a lineage can hold a person, and on that hill both of those things were true.

None of it was earned. I had not produced it, sprinted to it, or pretended my way there. It found me, because for once I was standing still where it could.

I have since learned something about myself that I now build my life around: my presence has an access condition. It arrives when the role physically cannot reach me. So on Friday mornings I leave the phone at home, drive until something makes me stop, and walk. I do not plan the destination. One Friday this past July that meant a rock at the edge of the Chattahoochee, watching the river go by, and what came to me there became the four coaching scholarships I am giving away in the fall of 2026. I did not go looking for that idea. It arrived on a threshold I had made on purpose.

That is the practice, in the end. Not a technique for getting across faster. A way of standing still long enough, and honestly enough, that what comes next can find you.

Three sentences

Here is the small version of that, the one I use with the leaders I coach and still use myself. Once a week, write three sentences and finish each one honestly.

What has ended is ____.

What has not yet begun is ____.

What is true today is ____.

The first sentence is the hard one. Writing down what has ended makes it real, and most of us have been working very hard to keep it from becoming real. The second gives the not-knowing a shape, which is not the same as giving it an answer. The third is where you actually lead from, because it is the only ground you have.

Then take the first sentence and say it out loud to one person who can see you. Not the plan. Not the reassurance. Just the ending, named plainly. I learned on a couch in 2019 what happens when you do. The wall you were bracing against turns out to be yours, and the people on the other side of it were never holding it up.

So a few questions worth sitting with.

What in your leadership has already ended that you have not yet said out loud?

What decision are you rushing because standing still feels like disappearing?

Who is waiting for you to name the threshold so they can stop pretending too?

If something in your leadership cannot continue as it is, and you cannot yet see what comes next, you are not lost and you are not behind. You are on a threshold. The old rule, the one that says work hard enough and you will be safe, cannot get you across it, because for the first time the thing that has to change is you.

I know that from the far side of my own. The boy from Bradford still lives in me, chest lifted, breath shallow, reaching for the wheel. I catch him sooner now. I still have the black card, kept as a keepsake. And I can tell you, from here, that I have never had more purpose or more peace, and I would not trade back for any of it.

Stand there. Tell the truth. Let what comes next find you.

Enough is actually enough.