

Susan Madison - July 17, 2011

## Navigating Liminal Spaces

(Readings are attached below.)

Liminal spaces. The spaces in-between what was and what is yet to be. The spaces betwixt and between. They are all around us. We move in and out of them all the time, sometimes quite unconsciously. Transition zones. Maybe they are the only REAL thing, Danaan Perry tells us, and the bars are illusions we dream up to avoid the VOID where the real changes occur.

Interestingly, the word “liminal” does not appear in many dictionaries—I did not find it in two of my three dictionaries, nor did I find it in my Roget’s Thesaurus. Although commonly used in both psychological and metaphysical arenas, the word remains an enigma. Both the words “liminal” and “liminality” are derived from the Latin “limen,” which means threshold—that is, the bottom part of a doorway that must be crossed when entering a building.

The word “liminal” first appeared in publication in the field of psychology in the late eighteen hundreds, but it was not until 1909, when French ethnologist, Arnold Van Gennep, introduced the word to the field of anthropology, that both the word and its meaning took hold.

Van Gennep was studying French folklore, describing the various rites of passage such as coming-of-age rituals and marriage. We in this church know about some of these rituals; we publicly celebrate three or four a year during our worship services: Age of Reason, Coming of Age, and Bridging are three that come immediately to mind. Our Age of Reason ceremony celebrates 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders who write their personal credos for the first time. Coming-of-Age, for our 13 and 14-yr-olds, honors passage into their teen years, and Bridging celebrates our high school seniors who move into young adulthood. These rites of passage—or ones similar to them—exist in most cultures and most religious traditions.

In his studies, Van Gennep described these rituals as having a three-part structure: a separation, a liminal period, and a re-assimilation. The initiate (that is, the person undergoing the ritual) is first stripped of the social status that he or she possessed before the ritual; then inducted into a liminal period of transition, and finally given his or her new status and re-assimilated into society.

“Liminality” then is that position “betwixt and between;” a “twilight zone” often of confusion and disorganization when we are called upon to re-evaluate things and re-order our priorities.

Danaan Perry's delightful parable reminds us that we are continually experiencing periods of liminality. We might, for example, be holding on to our bar-of-the-moment—whether it be a job, a particular relationship, an old way of behaving—we might be holding on out of security, obligation, habit, convenience, or even guilt. Even though holding on saps our strength and fuels our fear, we hang on because it represents our identity; it defines who we are. To let go, we think, means we will have to risk all that we rely on in ourselves and in our daily living. To imagine ourselves letting go and launching ourselves into liminal space is terrifying.

The parable speaks, as well, I think, to those among us who have had our bar-of-the-moment wrenched from our hands, Those of us who have lost our health, significant relationships, corporate jobs, or something else that defined our personal sense of meaning and purpose. Even though the bar over there with our name on it seems to hold promise for us—glorious possibilities, options, alternatives, growth, even transformation—we hang on because that bar over there raises questions.

Questions like:

Is that *really my* bar? What happens if I miss, if I fail?

Is that other bar reliable?

Will it be better than the one I already have?

What if I don't like it?

What about that bar over there? That hand-hold over there in the distance could be the answer for a weary soul searching for something creative, extraordinary. If we were to let go and fly in faithful expectation, who knows what grace and beauty we might experience? That bar in the distance is our call...whether we want it or not...our summons to transformation, to shed our old skin for new.

And the VOID. What of that interminable distance between our current bar-of-knowing and the bar-of-opportunity over there? What about that *place-in-between*? That liminal space. What will *that* require of us?

Traditional literature tells us over and over again that, every now and then, the soul needs to break free of this time and this place. It needs regular excursions out of our hectic, busy lives, out of our demanding relationships, out of our perpetual productivity. Thomas Moore, in his books on Soul, reminds us that these liminal places—these places between our physical reality and the transcendent, these places of uncertainty—are required by the soul. These threshold experiences, he says, are “moments of exceptional value to the soul and to the spiritual life.”

In looking at the void from a spiritual perspective, then, the Void is the very darkness and chaos from which clarity and order can emerge. It is only in the liminal spaces that we have true freedom of movement, freedom to try things out, to grapple with the world in a new way, to see how new attitudes or new behaviors will work for us. Letting go and soaring toward a new opportunity or a new way of behaving, can stimulate our thoughts and fulfill our deepest yearnings to fly free. It can inspire possibilities within ourselves that we thought had perished long ago, in our youthful imaginations.

For many of us, though, hurtling through that Void—especially if it is thrust upon us suddenly and is accompanied by loss or grief—will require all we can imagine we are, and more. It will demand all of our self-confidence, all of our courage, patience, and faith. Faith that the next bar is really there, that it is ours, and that soaring toward it is really our next step. It will raise in us feelings that go beyond just free-floating anxiety; it will raise our doubts and uncertainties, our vulnerabilities, our anger, our fear, and our loneliness.

For those of us who cannot see ourselves as soaring gracefully through the process of transformation, the scriptures can be helpful. For the first time, we will come to understand what the Psalmist meant when he said: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” where the important words become WALK THROUGH. We will WALK THROUGH. We will not remain where we are. We will walk through and be forever changed.

The irony for us is, that in hurtling through the void, we will commit ourselves to live in the moment.....not where we were yesterday or where we had planned to be tomorrow. And however we imagine it, that liminal space will heighten our awareness, bring us to our center, and probably call upon us to reset some priorities. It will invite us for a time to experience that endless, timeless space in which the Holy lives. In its gentle, terrifying embrace, we will discover that Courage is not about being brave, but about being unafraid to weep; and that Faith is not about certainty, but about flying through space in the dark.

For me, the unutterable truth of the “The Parable of the Trapeze,” whether or not we want to acknowledge it, is that we *live* in the void, we *live* on the threshold, we *live* in liminal space much of the time. We are marvelous creatures. Every day, in little and not-so-little ways, we live the dynamics of change. We are constantly letting go and picking up, dying and being reborn. It’s not something we think much about. Simply put, our very soul’s activity is liminal, and transforms us again and again.

Liminality has both 'space' and 'temporal' dimensions and can be applied to individuals, groups, societies, and possibly even to entire civilizations. Individuals encounter the liminal when sudden events affect them such as the death of a loved one, divorce, illness, or financial reversal. Likewise, rites of passage into critical life stages such as those described earlier. Both can be terrifying to the people who experience them; but they are sometimes equally as liberating.

In April, my brother's home burned to the ground. Fortunately, he and his wife were away on vacation, so the house was unoccupied. The situation threw them unexpectedly into liminal space—an in-between place—a time of transition. The fire destroyed all that they possessed, and they are now living in a rented house while their home is being rebuilt. It has been a tragic loss for them, but they agree it has offered both of them opportunities to change things both inwardly and outwardly.

Another significant variable is the "scale" or "degree" to which individuals or groups experience liminality. For example, societies are vulnerable to lengthy transition times during revolutions, political instability, natural disasters, or war. Our world is currently experiencing a multitude of liminal experiences due to political and cultural revolutions, terrorism, economic instability, and even global assimilation. Earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and hurricanes have up-ended the lives and livelihoods of many of the world's peoples, and brought much chaos, instability, and suffering. Our landscapes everywhere have changed dramatically, and we are right to be sobered and apprehensive. What does bring us hope amidst all this uncertainty, however, is the knowledge that all sorts of possibilities exist for re-structuring, re-education, and re-building.

Liminal times are everywhere. Dusk, described in both story and song as "twilight time", is liminal.....as is the morning's dawning. Midnight is a liminal moment—right between yesterday and today. Within the year, liminal times include the equinoxes and solstices; many cultures continue to joyously honor and celebrate these seasonal transitions. In our culture, New Year's Day and All Hallows' Eve are celebrated with noise-makers and scary masks to ward off the evils that might appear during these tender times.

Places can be liminal, as well: beaches that exist between the sea and land; mountain tops that dwell between the sky and the earth; marshes, caves, frontiers. Interesting that we often choose these locations for spiritual pilgrimages or vacation get-a-ways....places that offer us relief from the perpetual motion of our lives.

Crosswalks are liminal, as are hallways, doorways, windows, stairs, runways, hotels, even the internet. This sanctuary is a liminal space.

Not surprisingly liminal spaces have been the subject of numerous successful movies and television shows. “Castaway” and “Lost”, both heroic stories about life on an unfamiliar island following a plane crash, were box office hits and continue to be re-played from time to time. And probably the most famous in recent memory, the TV fiction series “Twilight Zone” which described a liminal nether region between light and shadow, science and superstition. Many of us can probably still hum the theme song from that show.

Fear is an inevitable part of the human condition, and it is good that it is there to caution and protect us as we are each flying through uncharted territory on a daily basis. I am learning that we should carry that fear lightly, though, knowing that risk is very much the key to our aliveness.

Since uncovering “The Parable of the Trapeze” more than ten years ago, I now allow the circus of my mind to come out every so often. When it does, it is usually immediately before I go to sleep, and I use it as a meditation to practice my flying. Launching myself from the platform to that bar over there helps me befriend my own anxiety. I even practice falling and somersaults and rebounds. As Sam Keen reminds us, “What I have managed to create after falling has often turned out to be better than the trick I planned. Falling gives fallible human beings the chance to start over.”

Look for liminal places and spaces in your life this week. Watch how you and others navigate them, and pay attention to what you teach children and grandchildren about them. They are there to delight us, teach us, to occasionally transform us. If we can learn to navigate them with courage and grace, they can turn the fear of transformation into the transformation of fear.

Amen. Blessed be.

Associated readings are attached below:

## First Reading

The first reading is entitled “The Parable of the Trapeze” by charismatic elder Danaan Perry, founder of the EarthSteward network. It is taken from his memorable book *Warriors of the Heart*.

“Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I’m either hanging on to a trapeze bar swinging along, or for a few moments in my life, I’m hurtling across space in between trapeze bars.

Most of the time, I spend my life hanging on for dear life to my trapeze-bar-of-the-moment. It carries me along at a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I’m in control of my life. I know most of the right questions and even some of the answers.

But, every once in a while as I’m merrily (or even not-so-merrily) swinging along, I look out ahead of me into the distance and what do I see? I see another trapeze bar swinging toward me. It’s empty and I know, in that place in me that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me. In my heart-of-hearts I know that, for me to grow, I must release my grip on this present, well-known bar and move to the new one.

Each time it happens to me I hope, (no, I pray) that I won’t have to let go of my old bar completely before I grab the new one. But in my knowing place, I know that I must totally release my grasp on my old bar and, for some moment in time, I must hurtle across space before I can grab onto the new bar.

Each time, I am filled with terror. It doesn’t matter that in all my previous hurtles across the void of unknowing I have always made it. I am each time afraid that I will miss, that I will be crushed on unseen rocks in the bottomless chasm between bars. I do it anyway. Perhaps this is the essence of what the mystics call the faith experience.

No guarantees, no net, no insurance policy, but you do it anyway because somehow to keep hanging on to that old bar is no longer on the list of alternatives.

So, for an eternity that can last a microsecond or a thousand lifetimes, I soar across the dark void of “the past is gone, the future is not yet here.” It’s called “transition.” I have come to believe that this transition is the only place where real change occurs. I mean real change, not the pseudo-change that only lasts until the next time my old buttons get punched.

I have noticed that, in our culture, this transition zone is looked upon as a “no-thing,” a no-place between places. Sure, the old trapeze bar was real, and that new one coming towards me, I hope that’s real, too. But the void in between? Is that just a scary, confusing, disorienting nowhere that must be gotten through as fast and as unconsciously as possible?

NO! What a wasted opportunity that would be. I have a sneaking suspicion that the transition zone is the only real thing and the bars are illusions we dream up to avoid the void where the real change, the real growth, occurs for us.

Whether or not my hunch is true, it remains that the transition zones in our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored. Yes, with all the pain and fear and feelings of being out of control that can accompany transitions, they are still the most alive, most growth-filled, passionate, expansive moments in our lives.”

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## Second Reading

The second reading is from *Learning to Fly* by Sam Keen, the acclaimed author of, among others, *Fire in the Belly*, one of the books credited with launching the men’s movement.

Keen was, in his words, “overeducated at Harvard and Princeton” and was a professor of religion and philosophy at “various legitimate institutions”. *Learning to Fly* is an exhilarating memoir of his late-blooming love affair with the flying trapeze.

Three times since I started trapeze, different friends have sent me the Gary Larsen cartoon that shows a dog on a tightrope riding a unicycle while juggling. The caption beneath says, “High above the hushed crowd, Rex tried to remain focused. Still, he couldn’t shake one nagging thought: He was an old dog and this was a new trick.” Maybe I should ask Gary to draw another cartoon inspired by a recent event in my family. My daughter Jassamyn came home from school to find her father repeatedly dropping her cat from a height of three feet onto the sofa to see how it turned in midair.

“What are you doing with my kitty?” she asked.

“I’m studying to be a cat,” I replied.

*He goes on to talk about learning to fall.....*

Initially, I thought of the net as nothing more than a safety device that would protect me if I could manage to fall correctly on my back, seat, or stomach. As I gained skill in twisting, turning, and landing, however, I realized it was more than a concession to human fallibility; it was also a platform from which to launch new flight.

A modern nylon net is essentially, a large trampoline that invites the flyer to convert a fall into a rebound trick—a somersault, a suicide dive, a high balletic leap. Professional trapeze troupes always end their acts with dramatic dives or somersaults to the net. In fact, the trick that seems to delight audiences more than any other is one introduced by Tito Gaona in which he plummets to the net, bounces very high, somersaults, and lands seated on the catcher's trapeze.

Gradually, I am learning to enjoy the creative possibilities of the rebound. I suppose there are exceptional men and women whose lives are an unbroken series of successes, but for most of us the ascending path is punctuated by times of descent, downfall, and depression. My failures have taught me there is always a second chance. What I have managed to create after falling has often turned out to be better than the trick I planned. Falling gives fallible human beings the chance to start over. This is why every man, woman, and society needs a safety net.