

## The Value of the Liminal

The fortune cookie was the crucial nudge. It said, “The adventure of a lifetime awaits you in France.” I was a sophomore in college and looking to study abroad for my junior year. Because of my remedial French (and this after years—8 years to be exact—of struggling with French) I was thinking I needed to stick with English and study in England, even though I really wanted to go to France. And then I opened the fortune cookie with its eerily apt invitation. And this is how I found myself several months later at Charles de Gaulle Airport feeling lost and alone.

Mind you, at that point, I had already been in Paris for two weeks hanging out with my best friend before the start of school. My friend Camilla planned to spend a semester in Paris while I would be there for the year. The whole setup felt ideal.

But then life did what life does: Camilla decided that city life was not for her, and she made plans to return to the green mountains of Vermont and the boyfriend she missed. The day she departed, I was to meet her at her hotel to say goodbye, but la greve – the strikes, so frequent back then, that slowed down the running of the metro -- made me late. By the time I arrived at her hotel, Camilla had already left for the airport. In the note she left behind, she encouraged me to come to the airport and offered to pay for my taxi there. At the airport, I found she had already disappeared on the other side of security. A string of upended plans.

Feeling abandoned and very far from home, I wandered the circular airport terminal in tears ending up at a pay phone where I sought the long-distance assurance of my parents. No one answered. Left with no other choice, I mustered my courage, the few francs in my pocket, my fragmented French and made my way back to Paris by train. And this is how I embarked on what, indeed, turned out to be one of the best—if not quite what I planned—adventures of my life.

Liminal from the Latin *limen*, meaning threshold, and referring to the lintel, the beam that forms the upper part of a window or door. A liminal space is a place of transition, a time between what was and what will be. Charles de Gaulle Airport

had been my liminal space back during my junior year of college. It marked the shift between the experience I thought I was going to have and the one I did have.

We are in a time of liminality – here at South Church, during this time of Lent and season of mud and on this day when we celebrate the threshold-crossing of our newest members of South Church.

Journeys need liminality.

Stories know this. Little Red Riding Hood venturing into the liminal space of the forest. Lucy going into the wardrobe that takes her from the country house in rainy, wartime England into magical, snowy Narnia and Harry Potter on the King's Cross train platform 9 ¾ that will transport him from the world of Muggles to the wizarding world at Hogwarts. It has been said that most stories are triggered by someone arriving or someone going out. In both cases, there is a crossing of a threshold. The liminal marks change and an opportunity to come into a truer version of oneself. It is the hero's journey that Joseph Campbell describes in a *Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

In travel, the liminal prepares us for being somewhere new. Hallways, train stations, waiting rooms, airport terminals are the palette cleansers on our physical journeys.

These neutral spaces are a more mundane version of thin places—those places in the Celtic tradition where the divide between heaven and earth is thinner. It is the realm where our orientation can shift. Setting aside any religious beliefs in heaven, the idea of a thin place offers a poetic way to think about thresholds.

I recall the hard threshold my family faced in 1992 when my 64-year-old father was dying from prostate cancer. I was 27 when I returned to the States at the end my school year teaching in England and saw a man who needed release from a body ravaged by cancer and filled with a pain I could not imagine. That summer before my father died in early September was like a breath holding, a liminal time that was difficult to bear. Stripped of so many of his capacities and joys, my father shifted his orientation toward death. He inhabited a thin place. In August when I

was scheduled to return to England, my father urged me to go and get on with my life rather than wait by his bedside. Leaving was one of the hardest things I've ever done. After arriving back in England, my father got on the phone one last time, and simply said, Love, love, love. Like an incantation, his words created a bridge, a gift to carry me over the threshold of his death.

Going back to the beginning of our life's journey, I think of the liminal space right before my daughter Emma was born. The sense of suspension that Tim and I felt in that waiting. The day before she made her entrance into the world—it was a cold Sunday in late December—we walked from our home in Kittery Foreside into downtown Portsmouth. At the time, of course, we didn't know that I would go into labor late that night. Faced with the enormity of the threshold we stood upon as first-time parents, we felt inchoate.

After Emma was born, I wrote a fragment of a poem about the experience:

Right before your birth  
my fingertips went numb  
You, who had been so easy to conceive, physically  
now felt impossible to grasp  
This, a threshold to a new way to hold life.

This is part of what the liminal facilitates: a loosening of our grasp on what was as it prepares us for what is next.

Interestingly, science proves this out. A recent study out of the University of Notre Dame has observed that crossing the threshold from one room to the next can contribute to our forgetting what we went into the next room to do. As research psychologist Gabriel Radvansky explains: "Entering or exiting through a doorway serves as an 'event boundary' in the mind, which separates episodes of activity and files them away. . . . Recalling the decision or activity that was made in a different room is difficult because it has been compartmentalized," he says. Thresholds then are not only symbolic but also psychological signals that we are entering a new context. They delineate our experiences and makes room for new ones.

Adolescence is a liminal time. This threshold between childhood and adulthood, for all its awkwardness, is filled with growth and possibility. It is a time of emergence.

But as it was the summer my father was dying, the liminal is often intermingled with grief.

When Emma was a baby and I was still breast feeding her, I remember looking at her one night, tucked in bed between Tim and me, and thinking, this is as safe as I get to keep you. I knew from there her life was a process for me of perpetual letting go. What seemed to me, a perverse act of love. You ate my baby, I say jokingly to my now 15-year-old. Meanwhile, her departure for college looms. Having children aside from the fullness and joy that they can bring to our lives, is a micro-dosing practice in grieving. Their rapid growth in their process of becoming is a series of endings and threshold-crossings. And so, as our children illustrate, we are surrounded by the liminal all the time, even though our busyness and the seemingly stable markers in our lives—the routines we have, the jobs we hold, the home and people we return to each night—may lull us into thinking otherwise.

It is when the liminal arrives by surprise, as it did when we learned that Reverends Chris and Lauren, our settled ministers, were leaving that the loss of the stable and familiar becomes pronounced and particularly unsettling.

Like Hansel and Gretel venturing into the woods, or me wandering Charles de Gaulle airport, the liminal can be disorienting. It disrupts the status quo. It disturbs our sense of solidity. We may feel lost, resentful even, about losing what we had, especially if we like what we had, as I did the company of my friend Camilla in Paris or in feeling shepherded by Reverends Chris and Lauren.

Loss is painful. And as cognitive psychologists tell us we are, after all, loss averse. We are more reluctant to lose something we have than ready to gain something of equal value.

But as Frank Ostaseski, founder of the Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco, notes, “For something new to emerge within us, we must be open to change.”

Constancy and certainty can entrench habit and contribute to complacency. The liminal wakes us up. The disorientation opens us to something new.

The Irish poet and philosopher, John O'Donohue, in his unpacking of the word threshold, describes how the liminal can be transformative: "The word threshold," he explains, "was related to the word thresh, which was the separation of the grain from the husk or straw when oats were flailed. It also includes the notion of entrance, crossing border and beginning. To cross a threshold is to leave behind the husk and arrive at the grain," he writes.

But because this process can be difficult, the liminal can be hard to tolerate, we may want to return to what was—to the time, for instance, when Chris and Lauren were our ministers. Or we may want to rush ahead to what will be—to the time when we hope to be content with new settled ministers.

Yet, this in-between time offers us something important—a space in which to review, reflect, and reconsider. We have a chance to re-vision, a word I love in writing for its invitation to re-see.

Franciscan monk and spiritual writer, Richard Rohr observes, "It is when we are in the betwixt and between, have left one room but not yet entered the next room, any hiatus between stages of life, stages of faith, jobs, loves, or relationships. It is that graced time when we are not certain or in control, when something genuine can happen. . . . It is the ultimate teachable space."

And as Ostaseski points out, there is value in being with what is. In his book *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*, he suggests, "We welcome everything, push away nothing." "In welcoming everything," he writes, "we don't have to like what is arising . . . The word *welcome* confronts us; it asks us to temporarily suspend our usual rush to judgment and to simply be open to what is happening." He goes on to say, "When we are open and receptive, we have options. We are free to discover, to investigate, and to learn how to respond skillfully to anything we encounter."

This reminds me of the "Yes and" rule in improvisation, where the members of an improv group agree to go with whatever is happening in the skit. You say you are

a tree; I don't say no. I accept your terms and add onto them. This invests the skit with playfulness, fluidity, and energy. But more profoundly, it demonstrates what is true in our lives that the terms are always changing, and so we are called to cultivate openness and flexibility in response.

I also like what reading poetry can teach us about how to encounter the liminal. On first, even second or third read, a poem can puzzle us. What to make of this space we have entered where we must tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity? Our current U.S. Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith in her piece entitled "Staying Human: Poetry in the Age of Technology" has this to say about it. Poems "disorient us from our home base, and they teach us to admit and submit to the feeling of vulnerability, to act upon empathy and curiosity."

I have seen this process at work at the Women's Center at the Correctional Facility in Windham, Maine, where I have facilitated poetry reading and writing groups through the Maine Humanities Council. The women and I gather in what is always a rather chilly and institutionally barren room to read and reread and unpack poems. The poems allow our interiorities to encounter each other, the poets and the readers. As we explore together, I try to leave sufficient space to sit with the poems, to give them time to work on us. Poems can be like many of us: slow to reveal themselves. This is, Tracy K. Smith observes, "a powerful submission to feelings of humility, shared vulnerability, doubt, and trust."

Humility. Shared vulnerability. Doubt. Trust.

The betwixt and the between evokes humility because it unseats us from certainty and comfort. It calls into question our assumptions and the seemingly stable identities that we have relied on.

Rilke offers us this invitation at the beginning of his poem "Entrance,"

Whoever you are: in the evening step out  
of your room, where you know everything;

And when our certainties get shaken, we are more aware of our vulnerability. But vulnerability, after all, is the human condition. It is a state of being open and allows us to genuinely connect and prepares us to receive.

Still, threshing is difficult and can feel like a dark night of the soul. We may have doubt about what's coming next. Like poems, the liminal takes its time in working on us.

We have to trust this deep work and our ability to navigate through and thrive in the new just as we trust that spring will somehow emerge from the hard ground.

In the words of the theologian, Thomas Merton, "You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope."

Thinking back to the difficult summer before my father died, I can see that the spirit-nourishing work I do today in helping people tell their stories and speak their truths was born out of that liminal time.

So, what I hope for us during this rich liminal time at South Church is that we are able to practice, what Ostaseski calls, a "fearless receptivity." And that we may draw on the transformative powers of imagination and improvisation to discover—as we may be already and have in the past—additional resources and possibilities in ourselves and each other that will help us move with strengthened spirit into what comes next.

Blessed be.

Now please rise in body or spirit to sing our final hymn -- #38 in the blue hymnal