

**St Luke's Virtual Clergy Wellbeing Programme**  
**14. Liminality in a time of Covid**

In her final article in this series of reflections, Michèle Hampson helps us to look at liminality and its role in our personal growth and development as well as that of the wider community.

Liminality, from the Latin *limen* for threshold, refers to a process of crossing over a boundary into something or somewhere new. In one sense we are doing that continuously as we live in the present moment; between past memories and future aspirations. However, I think it is helpful to think of liminality not as an inevitable passing through but as a place where we *deliberately* choose to pause and reflect; to discern what we are now called to be or do, before moving on.

It is a place of creativity and surprises. Jacob, pausing in the desert, wrestles with God overnight but leaves transformed; both disabled and blessed. The uncertainty of what might emerge may be why we avoid it.

This article highlights the importance of liminal space during the Covid pandemic and suggests how, using ideas from the social sciences, we might incorporate this into our personal and church life.

**The call to liminality in challenging times**

Most of us like the comfort of routines; we feel in control and confident. The pandemic and its changing restrictions is an ongoing challenge and we may simply wish it were all over. We may fear being overwhelmed by the fear of Covid and distress at the devastation it has caused. The temptation is to yearn for the familiar and to ignore how imperfect that was; the Israelites in the wilderness yearned to return to Egypt, where they were slaves.

Yet might liminal space open up 'treasures of darkness and riches hidden in secret places' (Isaiah 45:3)? Might our lament help us recall our dependence on God, our interdependence on each other, including the marginalised, and the call to tend the earth? Might we (re)discover God's plans for us and gain a renewed hope?

Liminal space is where we wait on God to equip and call us. Christ's incarnational life: the prolonged prayers, wilderness retreat, transfiguration and anguish in Gethsemane remind

us of the spiritual significance and costliness of liminality. It is a discipline; the fruit of personal and social transformation is not produced overnight.

Our tradition embodies liminal space in our Sabbath rest, penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, retreats and pilgrimages.

*When do we allow for liminal space in our lives and that of the church and how have we experienced God in it?*

*What are the fears that hold me back; can I give them to God?*

Through studying initiation rites, the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep<sup>1</sup> identified three stages, which offer us a useful structure:

### 1. Rites of relinquishment

To travel forward unencumbered we need to let go of old activities, habits and rituals, which might not be intrinsically problematic but are no longer helpful.

*How might we creatively mark the costliness of this process? Would rituals of lament be appropriate as a church community?*

### 2. Liminal rites

This stage of transformation, or process of 'becoming', to quote the psychotherapist Carl Rogers,<sup>2</sup> enables new abilities and possibilities. Our modernist culture values rationality, productivity and individuality; whereas liminality rebalances these with intuition, creativity and collaboration.

Rohr emphasises the need for vulnerability in order to be successful.<sup>3</sup> 'We actually need to fail abruptly and deliberately falter to understand other dimensions of life. We need to be silent instead of speaking, experience emptiness instead of fullness, anonymity instead of persona, and pennilessness instead of plenty. In liminal space, we descend and intentionally do not come back out or up immediately.'

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*. Trans. Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> Carl R. Rogers, *On becoming a person* (extracts) 1961. Accessed at <http://panarchy.org/rogers/person.htmls>

<sup>3</sup> <https://cac.org/between-two-worlds-2020-04-26/>

Unsurprisingly, both psychotherapy and initiation rites require an experienced guide and agreed outcomes. For ourselves:

*Do we give sufficient priority to our personal transformation?*

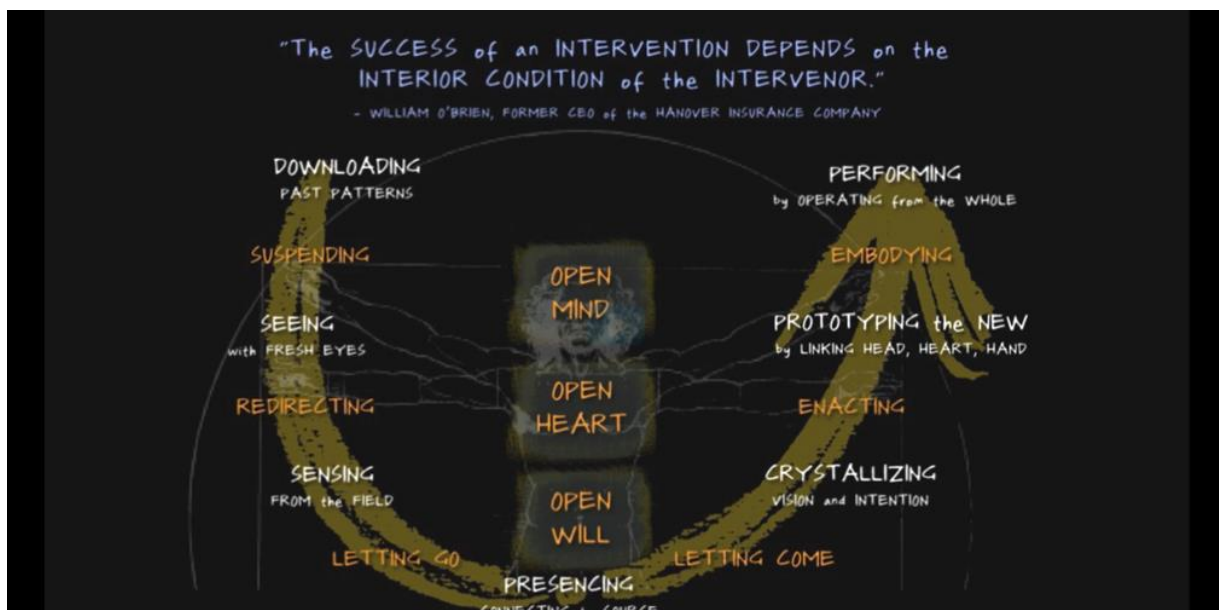
*What activities could help us inhabit liminal space? Perhaps silence, attention to our dreams, contemplation, art or journaling.*

*Have we a spiritual director or soul friend to support and guide us?*

Regarding systemic transformation, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology propose a programme, U-Lab,<sup>4</sup> to create a more sustainable global economy and society given that historic approaches have failed. The three-step approach involves observing the problem from every angle, before retreating and reflecting and finally acting quickly through a series of iterative steps.

The process places significance on the individual in the system; they need an open mind to suspend judgement, a compassionate heart to redirect their gaze and a willingness to let the old go and the new emerge.

The process recognises the importance of spiritual encounter in the 'presencing' step; a spiritual space where new possibilities can emerge before the way forward is crystallised.



<sup>4</sup>Otto Scharmer at <https://www.edx.org/course/ulab-leading-change-in-times-of-disruption>

A community of voices all with an agreed goal that uses the thinking of head and heart and seeks another's voice; this is liminal space at the centre of the change process!

Could this approach help the local and national Church in its decision making? What do we forfeit if we simply sandwich the work of problem identification, clarification, option appraisal and action in intercessory prayer?

*How might our church find overtly seeking liminal place helpful? How might the voice of the wider community contribute to the process?*

*How will we move forward as the body of Christ, through intuiting and acting on God's plans for us?*

### 3. Post liminal integration

With societal change, unlike initiation rites, there is no external group waiting to welcome our transformed selves. Good leadership and prayerfulness is critical for us to stay safe and on track.

As Christians our journey of faith never ends; Brother Roger of Taizé called us to view all structures (physical and relational) as provisional; to be abandoned if no longer helpful. Our stability comes through our relationship with God alone.

*What role should liminal space play in my ongoing life and that of my community?*

The Irish monks set sail in their coracles trusting God to guide their journeying, with the clear aim to spread the gospel. May we similarly journey in faith and trust.

Michèle Hampson is an honorary adult psychiatrist and priest in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. St Luke's is very grateful for her regular contributions to this series of reflections.

If reading this has led you to want to seek additional support or signposting please contact either the person in your diocese responsible for clergy wellbeing or St Luke's via its website or on [020 7898 1700](tel:02078981700).