

*Sometimes the best map will not guide you
You can't see what's round the bend,
Sometimes the road leads through dark places
Sometimes the darkness is your friend.¹*

One April Sunday my family and I visited a young church community in our town. On the way to the meeting we noticed two very different restaurant signs. The first invited, "Come in from the cold; warm food and hot drinks." The second proclaimed, "Swing into spring. Escape the heat with our smoothies and frappacinos."

Contradiction is one of the elements of liminality. Is it winter, or spring? When the seasons are in transition, and the old season hasn't quite given way to the new, we don't know quite what kind of weather to expect or even how to dress on a given morning. When we walk out the door it might be hot, or it might be cold. Worse, it may start out warm then shift to cold while we are on the road. We are plunged into uncertainty.

When the church is in transition, the same kind of confusion surfaces. Even casual conversations can become complex, with people using language in very different ways. "Church" and "evangelism" and even "Christian" carry baggage they didn't once possess. We struggle for definition, even reacting against it. Moving from a Baptist gathering to an E Free gathering becomes an experience in cultural shift, even within the same town.

Liminality is a place in between. It is emptiness and nowhere. Adolescence is the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. But liminality is more than a point along the way to somewhere else. It represents anti-structure to structure, chaos to order. The place between two world views is a liminal place. It is a place of dying and rebirth, even of metamorphosis, the place where the caterpillar spins its cocoon and disappears from view. Liminality is Israel in the desert, Jesus in the tomb.

Reality is that place between the sea and the foam. Irish Proverb

The Latin word *limina* means threshold. Liminality is where all transformation happens. It is when we are betwixt and between, and therefore by definition "not in control." Nothing new happens as long as we are inside our self-constructed comfort zone. Much of our day to day effort at life is toward maintaining our personal little world. Richard Rohr comments that,

"Nothing good or creative emerges from business as usual. This is why much of the work of God is to get people into liminal space, and to keep them there long enough so they can learn something essential. It is the ultimate teachable space.. maybe the only one. Most spiritual giants try to live lives of "chronic liminality" in some sense. They know it is the only position that insures ongoing wisdom, broader perspective and ever-deeper compassion. The Jewish prophets... St. Francis, Gandhi, and John the Baptist come to mind." ²

¹ Bruce Cockburn, "Pacing the Cage." From *The Charity of Night*, 1995. Golden Mountain Music Corporation. BMI.

² Richard Rohr. "Days Without Answers in a Narrow Space." National Catholic Reporter, Feb. 2002

Liminal space tends to be counterintuitive. In liminal space we need to walk in the opposite direction. We not eat instead of eat – we remain silent instead of talking. We search for emptiness instead of fullness. In liminal space we descend and intentionally do not ascend; “status reversal” instead of status-seeking. We indulge in shadow boxing instead of ego confirmation.

Few of us choose liminal space. Instead, God usually has to engineer the journey. Someone we trusted fails us; a job we counted on suddenly ends; a child or spouse dies; we are struck blind on the road to Emmaus. Once we arrive there, we are disinclined to call it home. This is why spiritual directors and counselors are often sought in times of transition.. we need outward support and encouragement to endure liminal space. On our own we tend to run for security, back to the familiar gardens of Egypt.

*In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.³*

Four years ago my wife and I stepped out of an organized faith community (the pond), into the large ocean. The ecology of the pond is highly structured. Roles are set and the rules for changing them are well established. Expectations, traditions, even meanings are non-negotiable. When you swim in the same pond every day for a year or two, you learn the names and the language, and you know who you are. The world closes in; the pond is all there is. There is a high degree of predictability, and that contributes to comfort and security...and boredom and self-deception (Rohr: “the mind only takes pictures using the film with which it is loaded.”)

It ain't the same in the ocean. Have you ever experienced tidal waters? Or large predatory fish? How about a storm at sea? Do you know how deep the waters get in the Laurentian Abyssal? Forget the scuba gear, it won't take you there.

We left a secure place where we knew the rules for uncharted waters where nothing was certain. That process launched us into an emotional and spiritual journey that we did not expect, and barely knew how to articulate. We had to learn to see in new ways, to listen in new ways, and then learn a new language to describe what we were seeing. We thought we had been using a good lens; it turned out our professional camera was a \$49 Wal-Mart special with fixed focal length, 35mm and f4. What had been a predictable and understandable world became unpredictable and mysterious. We had embarked on an unplanned journey with an unknown destination, without maps and with little light. We didn't have any recent stories to guide us, and no friends or mentors to emulate.

About the same time we left one community, we visited another. A woman was sharing from the early life of that community, and she quoted from a sermon titled, "Going, but not knowing," based on the life of Abraham.

³ T.S. Eliot, “East Coker III,” in *Four Quartets* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971)

If you haven't looked into the book of Hebrews recently, I encourage you to do so. It's difficult to grasp what a life of hope and faith is like while living in our security focused culture. Elizabeth O'Connor, one of the founders of the Church of the Savior in Washington, DC writes that, "Our chance to be healed comes when the waters of our life are disturbed."

Risk.. faith.. moving ahead into the unknown.. Which of us really embraces such a journey? We prefer the well worn pathways. And besides, we are "found" and not lost, right? We know the Bible has all the answers, right? ⁴

Outside the Comfort Zone

*The more you see, the less you know,
The less you find out as you go,
I knew much more then than I do now...⁵*

What happens when an entire culture moves into liminality? It isn't just language and philosophy that is shifting, the entire culture is on the move. As a result our individual identities no longer seem secure. Identity is referenced to particular communities and worldviews, to the broader socio-economic and cultural realities. When the context itself is changing rapidly, our individual identities experience similar fluidity. Suddenly the question, "Who am I?" takes on new poignancy, producing personal anxiety and feelings of pain and loss. ⁶

German sociologist Ulrich Beck describes this shift in his book, "Risk Society."⁷ He discerns three phases of modern culture, culminating in the most recent phase of "reflexive modernity." This is a world which no longer trusts institutions or employs them to anchor personal identity. Instead of placing a high value on loyalty to corporations and structures, the forces of individualism and the power of knowledge have generated a class of people who maximize their personal power of agency for their own benefit. Self is now the primary agent of meaning.. a tenuous meaning that has resulted in a new search for community and for something larger than the self.

Gone are the days of the Beverly Hillbillies, where roles and relationships were set in stone. I recall one episode where Jethro, the nephew, is sitting on the step of the mansion in Beverly Hills, elbow on knee, head resting on his elbow, looking as thoughtful as Jethro can look. Granny comes out the door, carrying a storm of feeling with her.

"Jethro, what in tarnation are you doin settin here?"

"I is bein a angry young man."

Her hard face looking suddenly puzzled, Granny asks, "What in tarnation is a angry young man?"

⁴ Within Christian thought two large theological traditions exist: kataphatic and apophatic theologies. Kataphatic theology characterizes the Western Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions where theology is constructed along the lines of propositional affirmative statements about who God is. Apophatic theology characterizes the Eastern Orthodox traditions where theology is constructed with less emphasis on cognitive affirmations (though they are not negated), and more on the wonder, awe, ineffability of God.

⁵ U2, "City of Blinding Lights," from *How to Dismantle an Atom Bomb* (London: Universal Music Publishing, 2005)

⁶ See Walter Brueggemann's note on ministry and grief at the end of the revised edition of *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001)

⁷ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society* (London: Sage Publications, 1992)

"Oh, you sets around an asks yourself questions, like "Who am I? Where am I goin? What am I doin?"

New clarity having arrived, Granny responds, "Well, I is an angry old granny, an you is Jethro Bodine, an you is goin into the kitchen to wash the dishes."

Hmm, not exactly spiritual direction. Things were so simple then.

If this kind of shift is a problem for those *choosing* it, consider those simply being swept along in the tide. Pastors and elders attempting to lead traditional communities may have been exposed to Leonard Sweet, but they haven't had time to read Ulrich Beck, or New Zealand sociologist Alan Jamieson ("Ten Myths About Church Leavers") or even Reggie McNeal. They feel responsible to hold together dying or fragmenting communities, but they have no framework to understand the tidal forces around them and no tools with which to shore up crumbling foundations. Raising questions about accepted methods or values can rattle the cage of other leaders around them, who may respond with defensiveness or fear.

At the ALLELON forum in Eagle, Idaho in September, 2004, Alan Roxburgh presented a story that remains definitive to the life and identity of a tribe of nomads. (Nomads are better than most of us at change and insecurity, because they wander in the wilderness without maps).

Alan pointed out that Israel was called out of bondage in Egypt, and called toward the land of Promise. But they had to first pass through the desert. In that place, their greatest desire was not to move forward, but to return to the life of predictability they had known.

Alan noted that scholars maintain that these stories were written down while Israel was in captivity in Babylon. While living in exile in a foreign land, Israel was doing theology.. rehearsing stories that shaped them as a people, and talking about issues of faithfulness. Israel's most creative work was done when they were a marginalized people, no longer a dominant force in the nation, no longer setting the pace.

This is one of the benefits of liminality.. we let go of the old answers and begin to ask new questions. We return to the ancient text looking for clues. Liminality is a tremendously creative place, a formless place of possibility where the Spirit of God hovers over the waters. We ask new questions, because a faith that no longer connects with experienced reality no longer makes sense. The answers while wandering in the desert are different than the answers that work when settled in the city. What worked while framed in modernity can get you killed in postmodernity. A theology of hegemony, when the church is at the center, will not be useful when the church is on the fringes.

*"I will carry the Ring to Mordor.. though I do not know the way."*⁸

I am fascinated with Israel's paradigmatic story. For forty years Israel wandered in the desert, neither at home nor at rest, not having reached the land promised to them since Abraham, or to Joseph or Moses. We see some of the tension in the story itself.. Moses is accused of bad leadership, God is accused of not caring. There is dissension and confusion. Quick answers (unhelpful) are tossed about. Old idols are resurrected.

⁸ Frodo in Peter Jackson's "The Fellowship of the Ring." (Wellington, NZ: New Line Productions Inc. 2001)

When the church on the corner stopped making sense for my family, and in fact generated more peril than promise, we left it and entered a liminal place. Our personal sense of identity was called into question, by ourselves and others. Were we still believers? Were we rebellious? Were we better than everyone else? Were we proud and divisive? Was God involved in our journey outside the walls, or were we deceived?

We wrestled with guilt and grief, and sometimes depression and anger. We found ourselves avoiding old friends, because our questions and actions were upsetting to them. We needed a safe place to process, but it was difficult to find one with people of faith. The Christian monoculture we knew had no place for us. We were calling into question too many things that were simply "givens." While the crowd was settled in a temple based culture, we were wandering in the desert in tents.

To develop a broader vision we must be willing to forsake, to kill, our narrower vision. In the short run it is more comfortable not to do this - to stay where we are, to keep using the same microcosmic map, to avoid suffering the death of cherished notions. The road of spiritual growth, however, lies in the opposite direction. We begin by distrusting what we already believe, by actively seeking the threatening and unfamiliar, by deliberately challenging the validity of what we have previously been taught and hold dear. The path to holiness lies through questioning everything.⁹

We found ourselves bothered by the certainty of those around us. "Surely everything is just fine," sounded a lot like "Peace, peace, when there is no peace." If everything was fine, then the problem was indeed with us. Or was it? Was the problem systemic, and not really personal at all? Was the "problem" a part of something that God was doing? Were the growing numbers of Christians who named no "church" as their home representing a general shaking and awakening to a whole new set of issues? Was there a cultural disconnect occurring, and was God opening our eyes to see it? Why did our large church have so little impact on the community around? And was the exodus of believers from the corner fortress God's plan to reconnect us with our neighbors? Was the old church dying as a new church was being imagined?

Certitude itself became a problem. We found ourselves in arguments about learning and change with those who claimed to be disciples (followers and learners). Walter Brueggemann writes,

"We all have a hunger for certitude, and the problem is that the Gospel is not about certitude, it's about fidelity. So what we all want to do if we can is immediately transpose fidelity into certitude, because fidelity is a relational category and certitude is a flat, mechanical category. So we have to acknowledge our thirst for certitude and then recognize that if you had all the certitudes in the world it would not make the quality of your life any better because what we must have is fidelity."¹⁰

We were shaken loose from our answers, to seek a deeper connection with truth. We turned away from propositions to a Person. When we left our faith community we heard a new voice calling us to "Follow Me." We forsook certainty for covenant faith, and a settled place for a journey.

⁹ M. Scott Peck, source unknown.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, quoted at the Emergent Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, September 16, 2004.

Some years down the road I had a dream. I was standing on the shore of what looked like a great river. I looked up, and towering over my head I saw the span of a huge bridge. But this bridge was unusual.. it stopped in mid stream. It was a bridge to nowhere, and I was intensely puzzled when I saw it.

But as I gazed at the span over my head, suddenly the bridge spanned the river and grounded on the other side. It was a miraculous act of God. It didn't require human ingenuity or invention. It required the intervention and power of God, and then the connection was complete.

The dream is both hopeful and problematic. There is a need for a bridge to connect the old culture and the rising culture. There is a need for a bridge to connect the last generation with the rising generation, and established leaders with new leaders. There is a need to bridge the gap between people of faith and seekers. There is a need to connect old knowledge with new. Many of us feel caught in the collision between the new culture and the old, stuck with old maps, caught between the need for security and familiarity and the need for change.. and we are searching for a way to move forward. We need to find ways to rest and wait on the Lord in confidence that He is at work, listening for His voice as we imagine new ways of being the church.

Margaret Wheatley, discussing the poetic wisdom of TS Eliot, captures the paradox and pain of liminality as "the opposing poles of paradox."¹¹

If you would save your life, you must lose it. If you would thrive in the new world, you must dissolve your old form. Letting go is the only path to safety. Surrounded by so much truth, it's a puzzle how we ever came to deny it. Did we ever really believe we could proceed through life by growing all the time, new and improved at every turn? How did the shadow disappear from our pursuit of the light? When did we forget that "there must be opposition in all things." When did we stop acknowledging the great space for discovery that is created by the opposing poles of paradox?

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope for hope
would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*¹²

Stumbling Forward: Disciplines of Readiness

One day a disciple came to his master and asked, "Master, what can I do to become enlightened?"

The master replied, "As much as you can do to make the sun rise."

Confused, the disciple replied, "Then of what use are all these disciplines?"

The Master said, "So that when the sun begins to rise, you do not miss it."¹³

¹¹ Margaret Wheatley. "Consumed by Either Fire or Fire," Journal of Noetic Science, 1999.

¹² T.S. Eliot, "East Coker III," in *Four Quartets* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971)

¹³ Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat. *Spiritual Literacy* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1998)

Most of us are experiencing the dynamics of transition. We no longer know what the church is.. and as a result we aren't sure who we are either. We don't know what that building on the corner is supposed to do or to mean. We aren't sure we want to support large mortgages or even professional leaders.

We have questions about the nature of community and belonging. We have questions about form and freedom and intentionality. We are trying to escape the dualism of Christendom, and discover the meaning of a whole life in relation to God, instead of a Sunday or meeting centered life. We are trying to rediscover the Gospel Jesus preached.

In his book "The Search to Belong," Joseph Myers talks about "transitional phases" in chemistry. Water is in a transitional phase when it is becoming ice, or heated to become steam. For a while it has the characteristics of both stages, but is truly neither.

We are not who we were, and not yet who we will become. It is a time of great awkwardness as we seek for a way to move forward, but sense we are traveling in circles.. no longer at home in the church and not at rest in the world. And this transitional place is complicated by the reality that so many are at different stages of comfort in the journey.. some beginning it with pain and anxiety, possibly feeling very alone or grieving what they left behind, even defending their right NOT to change; others have stepped outside their comfort zones and are asking new questions about culture, change, and the kingdom of God. Some are more comfortable than others with uncertainty and are discovering a new sense of belonging in a new kind of community.

In the introduction to "A New Kind of Christian" Brian McLaren presents a very simple diagram of transition. Picture an hour glass on its side. It is wide at both ends, and narrow in the middle. The space in the middle, the place of the pressure, is the place of transition. We begin in a wide place, a comfortable place, journey through discomfort, and arrive again at a new place.

It gets more complex than this, however, because in one sense liminality is the place we all arrive in these days. We arrive less certain, less secure, and with more questions than when we started. And we realize suddenly that this is not going to be a quick journey; it might take forty years. But our hope is to arrive in community. In fact, if we do not make this journey toward community, there is no real hope that liminality will result in transformation.

Friendship .. and community .. are critical pieces in the journey forward. In order to embrace the new we have to grieve the loss of the old. Few of us are capable of doing that work alone: grief requires community and friendship.

Likewise imagination and learning require friendship. One of the wonderful things about the Internet is the way it allows people to connect in relatively non-threatening environments. As we discover that we are not alone on this insecure journey, we become more ok with insecurity. This increased level of comfort actually empowers us to explore transitional places more deeply. We increase the power of our learning and discovery, even as we multiply it among friends. Anxiety pushes us into conditioned responses (fight or flight); safety allows us to move forward and explore the unknown with open hands and open hearts.

Our ability to move forward requires us to embrace diversity of thought and imagination. We need forums and safe places where people can shed their roles and identities and

need for control, in order to become learners together. Rosemary Neave comments on the power of networks that,

“Networks move us beyond isolated bursts of creativity and life to see patterns emerging, and perhaps inspire others to make links and get involved. Many [emerging] groups are small and fragile.. networking helps them see themselves as part of a larger picture..”¹⁴

Victor Turner, in his classic study of initiation, *The Ritual Process*, says that some kind of “shared liminality” is necessary to create what he calls *communitas*, or what we generally call church. *Communitas* in a spiritual sense does not come from manufactured celebrations or events. Attending lots of meetings won’t do it. Even parties and prayer meetings won’t cut it. They depend on artificial stimulants of food, drink, music, shared common space and energy: lovely and probably necessary, but not transforming. True *communitas* comes from having walked through liminality together -- and coming out the other side -- forever different. It happens in AA groups all the time.

Our ability to create these places will in part determine whether we are transformed and move forward as the people of God in this time.

“We have nothing to attain or even learn. We do, however, need to unlearn some things.

“To allow that unlearning, we have to accept what is often difficult, particularly for people in what appears to be a successful culture. We have to accept that we share a mass cultural trance, a hypnotic trance. We’re all sleepwalkers. We human beings do not naturally see. We have to be taught how to see.”¹⁵

The questions most of us are asking are both simple and complex, depending on our gifts and interests. They range from the personal, “How do I survive in this in-between place?” to “How do I help this community move forward from a closed fortress to a missional vision?” or, “How can our community connect with the emerging culture?”

More foundational questions surround both theology and practice: what does leadership look like in this in-between place? What kinds of structures will facilitate authentic transformation in this community? What sorts of disciplines are necessary to help us prepare for the changes we will face in the next decade? How can we facilitate the kinds of environments necessary for healthy and sustained growth in the kingdom of God in this city? How can we become a people that welcome Spirit?

Perhaps we can make this transition in less than forty years. For Israel, the years in the desert were necessary to shed their memories of foreign gods. Like Israel, we accommodated so much to modernity, the hope of technology, and the doctrine of progress that we all but lost our distinctiveness as God’s people.

We worshiped the idols of rationalism, power, and wealth. We, like Israel, have oppressed weaker people for the sake of our own benefit. The Gospel became a means of protecting ourselves from the fallen world, instead of a means to invite the fallen world to

¹⁴ Rosemary Neave. “Reimagining the Church.” Study Leave Report for the Women’s Resource Center. Waipu, NZ, 1996.

¹⁵ Richard Rohr. *Everything Belongs* (New York, NY: Crossroads Books, 2000)

His table. While we claimed to be concerned for the lost and for the redemption of the world, we isolated ourselves into comfortable clubs and fortresses.

The problem is that when people come to church, expecting to find God, they often encounter a religious club holding a meeting where God is conspicuously absent. It may feel like a self-help seminar or even a political rally. But if pre-Christians came expecting to find God -- sorry! They may experience more spiritual energy at a U2 concert or listening to a Creed CD."¹⁶

We sacrificed the heart of the gospel in order to build and maintain religious temples and empires. We didn't really challenge people to live transformed lives. We were content to commission a few missionaries while most of us lived at rest in a land of plenty.

The answers that made sense in the old context no longer work. In the heat of the desert, we are rediscovering who God is and who we are. Religious idols are beginning to crumble as we break free of our addiction to the culture and our addiction to power and control.

Now, however, the church is moving from the center to the margins.

Marginalization is a blessing. When we had a vested interest in the status quo, we could not see that the Emperor had no clothes. "Marginality, in short, leaves the church free, if it is faithful, to cherish its absurdity; establishment just makes it fall in love all over again with the irrelevant respectability of the world's wisdom and power."¹⁷ In times of great unrest, margins are places of immense creativity.

This sense of homelessness – this exilic experience – plays a large part, I believe, in the recent phenomena of the growth of interest in intentional Christian communities within North American, European, and Australian cultures. Their critically suspicious verve is directed not simply toward the institutional church, but toward the whole social-symbolic order of modern, Western Christianity.¹⁸

This history makes understandable the theological suggestion of Miroslav Volf that "the center is not the place where Christian faith should be anyway: it was born on the margins to serve the whole humanity ... social marginality is not to be bemoaned but celebrated."¹⁹ We do not celebrate our loss of influence, but that the influence we have will be more authentic, based on lived example and not rhetoric. We do not celebrate that we have lost our political power, but we celebrate that the weakness of the Cross is our strength. We recognize that a faith that exists on the margins contains a stronger resonance with apostolic faith, and that a witness from the margins, freed from the hegemony of the empire, is more likely to be free from the temptations of our culture and more true to the character of Jesus who stepped away from power and status to establish *communitas*.

¹⁶ Reggie McNeal. *The Present Future* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003) 59.

¹⁷ Robert F. Capon. *The Astonished Heart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996) 64.

¹⁸ Ibid. 103.

¹⁹ Miroslav Volf, "Theology, Meaning and Power: A Conversation with George Lindbeck on Theology and the Nature of Christian Difference," in *The Nature of Confession. Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 64.