

Liminal

some thoughts and definitions

Liminal space *[definition]*

Psychologists call "liminal space," a place where boundaries dissolve a little and we stand there, on the threshold, getting ourselves ready to move across the limits of what we were into what we are to be. Building on Mircea Eliade's concept of division of human experience in sacred and the profane, Victor Turner introduced the concept of 'liminal space': a space of transformation between phases of separation and reincorporation. It represents a period of ambiguity, of marginal and transitional state. Similarly does Arnold van Gennep, while describing rituals of transition. For Gennep, liminal or threshold world is a space between the world of status that the person is leaving and the world of status into which the person is being inducted. In post-colonial studies, for Edward Said, but especially for Homi Bhabha, the liminality is important as a category strongly related to the concept of cultural hybridity. For Bhabha, liminal as an interstitial passage between fixed identifications represents a possibility for a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. The concept of liminality as a quality of "in-between" space and/or state is of the utmost importance in describing some of the most interesting and highly specific social and cultural phenomena: the transcultural space, the transgeographical space, the transgender space etc. Sharon Zukin transferred the term in urban studies, saying that liminal space is a growing character of contemporary city: she argues that the localism, or neighbourhood urbanism, of the modern city has been transformed into postmodern transitional space. This space is 'betwixt and between' economic institutions but is best described by the adjective liminal because it 'complicates the effort to construct identity' Liminal spaces are ambiguous and ambivalent, they slip between global market and local place, between public use and private value, between work and home, between commerce and culture.

http://parole.aporee.org/work/hier.php3?spec_id=19650&words_id=900

Liminality in the Arts

by Lim Le Ann

"Liminality is derived from 'limen', meaning threshold. The concept of the 'liminal space' as introduced by anthropologist Victor Turner, suggests the idea of ambiguity and ambivalence. This in-between space should allow active exchanges of ideologies, concepts and methods of working. There is an indication of a transition from one state or space to another, an on-going search for answers, yet the end point might not or need not be defined. Therefore, the 'liminal space' might be read as a metaphorical realm where ideas and concepts: artistic, political, cultural, social or otherwise, are in constant states of contestation and negotiation."

http://elephantwirl.blogspot.com/2006_04_01_archive.html

Liminal Spaces and Transformation

by Robert D. Rossel, Ph.D.*

I woke up this morning with my mind buzzing with some loosely connected images that I think are related to questions about transformation and new beginnings. I had a dream in which I kept getting lost and had no reference point to help me find my way out. It was completely dark and very disorienting—much like the time I went scuba diving in Lake Champlain when the water was so murky that I could not see my hand immediately in front of my face. I don't know if you have ever had such an experience. I can tell you it is extremely disturbing. To see our way we need reference points. Without reference points we have no depth of vision, no way to orient ourselves in space. It feels claustrophobic, suffocating, deadly. In Lake Champlain I was doubly unnerved because my other senses—smell, hearing, touch—were unhinged from their usual, familiar, and useful place in my experience. I could hear the sound of my breath with each inhale and exhale (shorter and more panicky as time went on), I could feel the water as it passed over my body (somehow different from the water I knew and felt comfortable with), I could taste the dry, compressed air as I breathed (not very satisfying or comforting in this context). I was out of my element, groping around in 30 feet of water in utter darkness, bereft of my usual habitual responses in orienting myself in my experiential world.

Sometimes life is a lot like this. We get kicked in the gut. Nothing works. We can't even tell what is up and what is down. All of our familiar and cherished ways of making sense of the world have flown out the window. We feel completely in the dark. As I look back over my life it is usually such times that are associated with major life transitions. Is that true for you too? Isn't this the dying that has to take place for us to learn new ways to see? In Buddhism there is something called "the middle way." In the middle way there are no reference points. We chose to let go of habitual responses and the usual attachments and things to grasp and see in the world. Instead, we embrace uncertainty and become more and more curious about a world where things can be both up and down, good and bad, bright and dark at the same time. If we can practice resting in the middle, we learn new ways of orienting in our world that draw on other senses we didn't even know we had. As we exercise these new senses—intuition, beginner's mind, faith—the world takes on a new shape and we can see things with new eyes. This gives us a way to stay centered in the tumult, to see possibilities where before we might have been mired in despair. Above all it gives us ways of being with those feelings that nag at us most insistently when we feel caught in those painful liminal spaces—loneliness, boredom, anxiety. It seems so basic to our conditioning that we seek some form of resolution from painful emotions. We feel more secure in the familiar world of praise or blame, victory or defeat, feeling good or feeling bad than in the liminal world where we sit with what we feel and do not rush to resolution. When we cultivate different practices that allow us to rest in the middle, we discover over time a growing ability to relax into the unfamiliar and eventually turn our usual fear driven patterns upside down. That, to me, is the essence of transformation.

I suppose if I were more enlightened at the time I could have transformed my Lake Champlain experience into something other than described above. Perhaps I could have allowed myself to be curious about the unusual experience of being utterly in the dark and groundless. I could have stayed with the breath as one grounding constant in my experience—something that embodies and joins the middle way of in/out, holding on/letting go. I could have then given myself over to curiosity about weightlessness, drifting in the dark and learning something about the benign quality of experience I could have allowed myself to trust that even in the dark I can relax into another unfamiliar dimension of experience where sounds are intensified by the surrounding fluid environment. I could have learned about orienting in unfamiliar space and wondered about all the things I miss when I feel like I am lost and groping in the dark.

I think it was Pema Chodron, in *When Things Fall Apart*, who said that disappointment; embarrassment, fear, and other such experiences where we feel off balance and out of sorts are a sort of death. We have lost our sense of meaning and purpose entirely and are unable to hold it together, losing the confidence that we are on top of things. Rather than accept that it takes death for there to be birth, we just perpetually struggle and fight against our fear of these little deaths that must happen in our lives for us to grow.

Transformation, as I understand it, is change that emerges out of these little deaths we experience in our lives. It is the willingness to embrace uncertainty and fear as a message from the universe that we need to stop struggling and look directly at what's threatening us. Transformation becomes the liberating process that opens the door to new beginnings, new perspectives, and allows us to truly step into unknown territory. The spiritual journey involves the willingness to go beyond hope and fear, stepping into unknown territory, letting the energy of what we are feeling pierce us to the heart. In the Buddhist tradition this is the path of compassion – the path of cultivating human bravery and kind-heartedness. In my life the times of transformation were always marked by this experience of death and rebirth and a willingness to stay with the uncertainty and fear long enough to see things with new eyes—a deeper field of vision. Easier said than done, but still a noble way to live. It seems that every time I move into new territory physically and emotionally, if I do not rush into making it safe and familiar, I am able see things with this deeper field of vision and learn something new about myself and life. Any spiritual path if it is truly useful in promoting transformation must give one tools—prayer, meditation, reflection—to stay centered and open in this experience of death and uncertainty. The spiritual path gives us tools to lean into the discomfort of life and not rush to protect ourselves from it. To wake up is to cultivate the ability to stay focused and centered in our pleasure and our pain, in our confusion and our wisdom, so that we can fully drink in each moment of our confusing, unfathomable, ordinary everyday lives.

http://www.seishindo.org/articles/rob_rossel3.html