

Liminality as Pan-Theoretical Model for the Counseling Arts

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Abstract

At the turn of the 20th century, anthropologist Arnold van Gennep identified broad patterns of renewal within indigenous, agrarian, pre-industrial communities. From his observations of the cultural rites and rituals that were utilized to foster those transitions, he came to understand a particular kind of social transition he named *The Rites of Passage*. That now well-known phrase became the title of a book by the same name that was published in 1909 (van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960). These rites not only fostered transition but protected the social group from the danger inherent in chaotic transition. These rites accompanied almost every conceivable passage of life, including birth, matrimony, and death. And they signified the changing seasons of nature as well as great disasters that afflicted individuals and communities.

The time and space on the other side of a critical threshold, the time of transition, has been referred to as liminality, based on the Latin, *limins*, which means threshold. In terms of rites of passage, the model includes a pre-liminal phase, the liminal middle, and reaggregation into a post-liminal reality. This pattern was found to be universal, practiced in many cultures.

By the mid-20th century, anthropologist Victor Turner built upon and expanded van Gennep's work. As he defined society in terms of a "structure of positions," his model of rites of passage became one of structure, anti-structure, and re-structure (Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

The person moving through the rites of passage becomes a liminal being, a passage person, and is ritually defined by special names, symbols, practices, and dress. They are typically ushered through the process by tribal elders who act as liminal guides. And the cohort of initiates formed a special community around their shared liminality, a status Turner coined as *Communitas*.

Because liminal persons are passing from one known and definable status through an entirely uncertain one, they represent social danger to the community. As those temporarily outside the structure of tribe and community, they became ritually unclean, a social definition known today

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when people live outside social norms and expectations (Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966).

This transformation is understood to change the very being and identity of the initiate; they passed through symbolic death and rebirth (Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press, 1915). The locale of the passage was a highly symbolized locale of sacred time and space (Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959, 191). Though the great transitions take place in chronological time, they are also grounded in an idealized timelessness, a time beyond time.

Though it is common for an individual or community to pass from one state of being to another, there are also instances in which the state of liminality becomes ongoing or unending. Some semi-permanent forms of liminality are voluntary; people choose to enter the margins of society and live in alternative communities. But other forms of permanent liminality are involuntary, such as one finds in the aftermath of genocides, life-long incarceration, or living in the social margins of society as an outcast.

As an individual makes a critical transition, what is experienced in exterior rites and rituals is matched by a parallel interior movement. The liminal person departs from one definition of the self and transitions to a new level of consciousness. The symbolic mythic passage is internalized. One becomes a new being.

In the contemporary world, these liminal realities take on many and varied forms. They arise through preestablished traditions or from a spontaneous response to events. They may or may not enjoy the guidance of identified liminal guides. The presence of community may or may not assist in the passage. And some forms of liminality may not include a sense of passage at all.

In addition to an unfolding liminal passage that includes beginning, middle, and end, other forms of liminality are not so linear. Some in-between persons exist in the margins, on the edges of society, a place one enters voluntarily or without volition. Other liminality exists in the intersections, in the space where one reality collides with another, and creates an undefined third space that can be the source of either great confusion or creative genius. In our present culture, liminality is often experienced at the edge of any predictable or recognizable social landscape: abandoned cities, empty buildings, ruins, VR alternative reality, and the dystopian futurescapes of fictional literature or film. The consulting room of the therapist often serves as a modern equivalent to the rites of passage. Movie theaters provide a temporary liminal time and space. And so do adventure pilgrimages of every shape and size.

Our present historical moment includes vast social conflict and dislocation, war and the aftermath of war, the rising specter of an ecological crisis, the impacts of pandemic, and an entirely unknown technological future. Though people of all eras have known liminal phenomena, the people of our time have witnessed an exponential growth of liminality, in large

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part the result of rapid and complex change. We are living in a liminal moment of outsized proportion and intensity. And the many forms of liminality overlap and occur simultaneously.

The outlines of liminality – crossing dramatic thresholds, wandering the wilderness, leaving behind the old and discovering new sign markers for the future, living with ambiguity, uncertainty, and anxiety – provide a distinctive lens through which we may see and interpret our reality. We also are able to learn a new language with which we can name our many voluntary and involuntary transitions. The liminality model is process oriented, recognizing the ways in which transformation may take place. This includes an implicit future orientation, one which may contribute a sense of hopefulness.

This is a pan-theoretical model for working with those who are living in or passing through life-shattering and potentially life-transforming liminality. It is based on the research and narrative contributions of practitioners in the book, *Leaning into the Liminal: A Guide for Counselors and Companions* (The Liminality Press, 2024). This includes the role of the liminal guide; applications for and contributions from contemporary forms of psychotherapy, spiritual care, and counseling; war and its aftermath; spiritual direction; hospice care; and the ambiguous role of the liminal companion.

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