

Liminal Space: Living on the Threshold

Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo

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This time of year is full of mystery and wonder. I remember, oh, I so remember Halloween, when I was growing up in the suburbs north of New York City. What I remember is not the costumes I wore or the candy I got – I remember the atmosphere, the feelings. The growing tension of expectation as darkness fell, the cool, windy damp of an October night, an undefined sense of anticipation, with perhaps just a small frisson of fear. I sometimes even feel that way sitting at home waiting to see if there will be trick-or-treaters on Halloween night.

Halloween is a night that is wild, when anything can happen, with people small and large tramping around in the dark, invading each other’s front porches to be welcomed by leering pumpkins and arched black cats, lugging bulky bags or pillowcases of candy, ringing doorbells and standing back to see what might happen. In my memories of childhood Halloweens, always at twilight, the glimmering time between light and darkness, nothing looked the same as it did in daylight, not the houses or the bushes or the terrain. And the people, in masks and makeup and strange costumes, certainly were not recognizable as my familiar friends and neighbors.

What is it about Halloween, when we are given permission to break free – to dress in outlandish outfits, to go out after dark begging from door to door? The children in their costumes stand on our threshold holding out their bags, waiting for a treat, threatening a trick – they could be dangerous. Even if they no longer soap our cars, tip our cows or up-end our outhouses, they hold us hostage for our snickers bars and candied apples. This is a time of year when we subject ourselves to blood-curdling terror just for the fun of it. Our teens in the church go to great lengths to create a Haunted Basement below the church, just so the younger ones can get scared out of their little socks. Shrieking your head off in terror, just for fun. Just at Halloween. Just in this mysterious time of year.

In the ancient traditions, this time of year was recognized as the end of the growing season, the beginning of the annual decline into darkness, cold and death. As one author described it, “By the halfway point of fall we are surrounded by an ambient prescience of impending death. Death and decline. Death and disappearance. The Sun seems to be dying as we approach the winter solstice six weeks away. Our world is steeped in deep shadows, the light decreases daily, dimming toward the shortest, darkest day of the year. And the year itself is reaching the end, drawing to a close. Another cycle conducting its course.”

At this time of year we find the Christian holidays of All Hallow’s Eve, All Saints Day and All Souls Day, the Babylonian feast day of Nippur, Scandinavian fire celebrations to honor the start of the Winter Nights, and the Celtic festival of Samhain. Some believe that in ancient Ireland, Samhain was the central feast day of the Celtic calendar, “a time when the barriers between this world and the Otherworld temporarily disappeared so that the living and the dead could meet.” Rituals were developed to make sure those meetings were not too threatening: offering gifts and sacrifices, wearing disguises, lighting fires. It is a dangerous time, this thinning of the veils between the worlds – a time when the doorways are more open, the thresholds are more easily crossed, creating a liminal space, a threshold space between different realities, different possibilities.

The word “liminal” comes from the Latin word *līmen*, meaning "a threshold" – it is defined as a psychological, neurological, or metaphysical state of being on the "threshold" between two different existential planes. The liminal state, the threshold between the planes of being, is characterized by ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy. Liminality is a period of transition where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed - a situation which can be disorienting, but which can lead to new perspectives.

. . . ambiguity, openness, and indeterminacy – dissolving or changing sense of identity disorientation. . . At one level, that sounds pretty scary – but in reality, we do that all the time. Today we welcomed one of our newest young ones into the church community, even as we memorialized those who are no longer among us. Crossing thresholds, moving between the planes of being and non-being. Liminality is the essence of human nature – we are part of an organic process of ebb and flow, constantly changing, right down to our very cell structure. We are born, and in being born we leave a watery environment and enter a dry one, so that we have to learn to breathe in a whole new way.

As we grow, we go from stationary to mobile, from horizontal to vertical, we learn to see and hear and understand the world in ever-new ways, traveling from infancy through childhood, across adulthood into our later years. We may get married or take a partner, we may get divorced; we enter the hazards of parenting, we care for our own parents as they age; we change majors, we graduate, we learn new skills for new careers perhaps several times in our lives. We move through health and disease and perhaps back to health again, perhaps not. Entering at birth and departing at death, a human life crosses one threshold after another.

And as we move across the thresholds, we may be left wondering, who am I in all this – who am I personally, who am I relationally, who am I professionally -- how am I my old self and how am I new, how am I emerging into new space? This is liminality, this is life on the border, on the boundary, characterized by ambiguity, openness, indeterminacy, fluidity, disorientation and reorientation, discerning, making choices, following new paths and discovering that they open up into entirely new territory.

That experience of liminality is so human, so much part of our shared experience. There are so many turns in the journey – with a new career, or with a new phase of life; facing a loss, a serious illness, encountering an unexpected challenge in the life we thought was all planned and predictable. Our old life is no longer available, our new life is not yet completely born, and so we find ourselves in the liminal space, living in the open-ended uncertainty between the past and the future – a space that is indeterminate, uncertain, ambiguous, low on certainty, high on potential.

The liminal space is that place at the threshold. It may be the threshold between the worlds of life and death. It may be the threshold between our brightly lighted houses and the dark porch where the hobgoblins are holding us ransom for candy, or perhaps the threshold as we willingly or unwillingly enter the Haunted Basement, facing our fears in the dark. It may simply be the threshold between our lives as they have been, and as they will be in the next moment, in the unpredictable unfolding we all encounter day to day.

Liminality is a period of transition where normal limits to thought, self-understanding, and behavior are relaxed - a situation which can lead to new perspectives.” We are no longer who we were, and we are not yet fully who we will be come. We are liminal beings, perhaps not so much beings as becomings, emerging into some new space, new identity, new possibility.

A group of people, including a congregation, can enter the liminal space as well as can an individual. Groups have a corporate identity, a sense of who they are and how they do things. And then something happens – the environment changes; new members who enter can change the patterns of relationships and expectations; the old ways of doing things are disrupted for various reasons; an established leader departs and a new one has not yet fully emerged onto the scene. There is uncertainty, unpredictability. The liminal space releases the old but the new is not yet in place. This is a space that not only permits but calls for expansion of thought and self-understanding, for new perspectives.

Every church, just as every person, is a becoming, an organic system that responds to changes in its environment and in its members, its minister and its leaders, even to changes that may be brought by its visitors. Just as people do, a church moves into and out of the liminal state, across thresholds, sometimes feeling suspended between the known and unknown worlds. This church, this Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo, is in such a threshold time now, having entered with intention and awareness into a liminal state, ripe with potential, with uncertainty, with possibility. There have been some changes already – a different minister to partner with you in this transitional time; new ways of receiving the newsletter, a plan to have paid staff for the nursery and to hire a membership coordinator to the staff; installing windows in the doors of the Parish Hall and Religious Education classroom for safety; applying for the church to be on the Historic Register – changes of various sorts, each calling for some adjustments, for some new understandings of who we are as a gathered congregation.

The liminal time is upon us, and if you read Dave Batt's column in the November newsletter, you will know that the Board of Trustees has affirmed what the Interim Search Committee suggested last spring, that the interim period be extended to give time for the congregation to engage in some important work to prepare for the next ministerial search, affirming its identity and vision, establishing stronger governance patterns, and deepening the culture of covenant and stewardship. This is not a fallow time, but a time of deep and discerning activity and development. This is a time to explore our commitments and our dreams, a time to explore what may be possible, a time to say yes to what may be emerging here.

The liminal space can be full of delightful surprises, and new unfoldings that surpass our wildest imaginings. This liminal space calls for our response, our affirmation that we will proceed with courage into the unknown, that we will face the uncertainty, the ambiguity and indeterminacy, perhaps the disorientation of the transitional time. We can choose to step into the emerging space across the threshold and say “Yes” to the new, “Yes to being open and a little bit experimental, “Yes” to stretching into new ways of being. We can affirm our “Yes” to life, to truth, to love.

Sources:

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