

# Liminality

As I have explored Ritual, and tried to understand the origins, purpose and meaning of Rites, I have found myself most interested in transition, and the idea of a Rite of Passage. And this in turn has led me to what I have come to understand is at the heart of ritual: liminality.

This was a new concept to me, and so may be to others too.

First, some definitions.

Wiktionary offers this:

## **Etymology**

From Latin *liminalis*, from *limen*, "threshold"

## **liminal (plural liminals)**

1. Pertaining to a threshold or entrance.
2. Relating to a beginning or first stage of a process; inceptive; inchoative; marginal; insignificant.

But to be honest that doesn't really get me there, in terms of a proper handle on the concept.

One of the most helpful signposts for me has been a booklet self published by Jean Clark (who is a Fellow of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy), called "Change is Boundaries Dissolved"<sup>1</sup>. This wonderful little A5 booklet, just 25 pages long, was originally a presentation to the Norwich Centre for Personal and Professional Development. In it, Clark describes her exploration into the process of transition. She draws on her own experience of personal transition, and of helping others through her work as a professional counsellor, and she uses quotes from her own poetry, such as this excerpt:

*Change is being lost in strange  
unreadiness to end or begin  
Change is fear of things unknown  
approaching  
Change is water flowing under bridges  
a leaf carried by the flood  
to fortune or to oblivion  
Change is mourning for things ended  
regret for things undone  
now never to be known  
Change is challenge  
to begin anew  
a letting go, renouncing, moving on  
to find an unpredicted life  
now shaped*

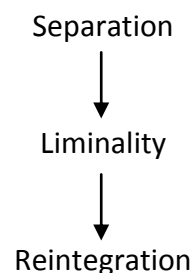
She quotes from a novel by Morris West<sup>2</sup> where the hero finds himself physically and metaphysically lost, and is advised by a chance acquaintance (who happens to be a doctor) to:

“pick up the pilgrim staff and take the road... to the place of unknowing... A place where you are strange and a stranger and lonely, and because of that, perhaps afraid”

Clark draws parallels with the “journeys” we make in our lives – moving to new towns, starting new jobs or training programmes, new relationships, or after suffering some loss or other. In these situations, we are “cast into limbo, and must dwell there for a while, until we again move to a place where we create new boundaries of who we are and where we might be, but with wider perspectives about what is possible.”

This “limbo” is, not surprisingly, a description of liminality. As Clark puts it, “For a time we are in a border territory between the known and the not yet known.” We cross a threshold (or “limen”) and find ourselves in a place where we have no fixed or established role, but which is also not yet the new place to which we are headed. We may in fact not even be sure which way we should be going, what or where that new place is.

Clark makes reference to the work of Van Gennep, and to Victor Turner. I have discussed Van Gennep elsewhere in this resource section, and in particular made reference to the three stages of transition he identified:



In a much quoted excerpt from a classic work<sup>3</sup>, Turner describes liminality thus:

“The state of the liminar becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or the coming state.”

Turner is discussed in more detail in a really useful paper published in 1991<sup>4</sup>, and this helped me to understand the place of symbol in ritual/rites. Deflem quotes Turner directly, and his definition of ritual places beliefs in a key place:

“(Ritual is) prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers.”

According to Deflem (and Turner) the meaning of ritual is carried in the symbols which form part of the rite.

“... a symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behavior; it is a "storage unit" filled with a vast amount of information. Symbols can be objects, activities, words, relationships, events, gestures, or spatial units.”

and in a later work, Turner offered a development on this definition of ritual:

“Ritual is "a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests"”

Murray Stein wrote a book exploring the liminal state that is “Midlife”<sup>5</sup>, and Jean Clark quotes from it:

“life’s pathways to the future appear to be unmarked and even uncharted and the future itself seems unimaginable in every single direction.... The person seems to stand perpetually at some inner crossroads, confused and torn.”

## Conclusion

I have been thinking about liminality, and transition, and considering how an awareness of these phenomena could inform my professional (clinical and educational) practice. What I am currently thinking is – perhaps a lot of the people with whom I work/facilitate, and for whom I provide professional care, are presenting liminality to me?

When someone presents with distress or difficulty, this will manifest as (amongst other things) anxiety, loss of motivation, low mood, poor concentration, loss of confidence, and struggles with their identity. I now see these as features of liminality – and therefore of a stage in transition. Perhaps recognising this will help me to choose the right intervention? Which could be simply a witnessing of a process, but might also involve using Narrative techniques to allow the person to navigate their way to the other side of the liminal.

And perhaps the rituals of my professional work provide a framework for the liminal, and can offer some security and sense for the lost and unknowing?

Mark Waters, November 2011

## References

1. Clark J. Change is Boundaries Dissolved:  
(available from <http://www.norwichcentre.org/Products.htm>); 1988.
2. West M. Summer of the Red Wolf. London: Heinemann; 1971.
3. Turner V. Dramas, Fields and Metaphors. London: Cornell University Press; 1974.
4. Deflem M. Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner's Processual Symbolic Analysis. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 1991; 30(1):1-25.
5. Stein M. In Midlife: a Jungian perspective. Woodstock: Spring Publications; 1983.