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## SANCTIFYING SPACE AND CREATING LIMINAL BRIDGES

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### Abstract

In a polarized world, civil discourse or adventuresome engagement about differences in social location, socio-economic status, and belief systems can be rare. Fear-based entrenchment is rendering faithful people “stuck” in a conversation irrelevant to the rest of the world. In this troublesome meta-context, leaders have an opportunity to deepen and widen understandings of holy conversation occurring in a particular kind of space as a process for individual and organizational change. This article proposes a model for leaders who are interested in moving into the liminal space of a relational, intersectional bridge, a critical and intentional act of inviting positive change, particularly in local contexts.

### Introduction

Pronouncements and papers continue to be produced about what leaders “ought” to be doing to usher in socio-economic justice; there are many important starting points and intersections for this work. However, despite best efforts and much proclamation, polarization is on the rise, and according to the Pew Research Center, the European Commission, and the International Labour Organisation, the middle class has been diminishing in number for decades (and as of 2015, no longer the majority population) in the United States and Europe,

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and plateauing in emerging economies,<sup>1</sup> complicated by economic and cultural injustices occurring at crisis levels. Churches and not-for-profits still call for a faithful approach to justice and reconciliation, a worthy goal, but it seems to me that people of faith in the North and Western worlds today either do not know the path forward or cannot sustain it. Or from either the “right” and the “left” of the faith spectrum, people demonize the Other, thereby polarizing and often poisoning social discourse. It appears that that honoring difference in light of the constant stream of bad news and hate-mongering activity becomes more challenging by the year. So, with the premise that love of neighbor—and even enemy—requires work for justice in intersectional ways, I propose here a process by which we can move forward in this never-ending faith journey.

In a time of paradox, when nation-states scurry to re-establish their identities by securing borders in light of refugee crises that blur those very borders; when unprecedented, rapid global economic shifts widen the gap between rich and poor; and when terrorism takes on more creative forms with extreme acts of violence becoming normative, there is great need to change our ways. To do so, we need to disrupt our habits of reactivity so that we are freed to engage cultural difference, learn different understandings of power, and re-think how the church understands its role of inviting life-changing, holy conversation for the sake of the world.

Yet, such a focus can be overwhelming when the church faces the extremity of the problem on a global scale. The church’s task of pursuing life-giving relationships is a tall order. It will require difficult, brave conversations and a willingness to self-critique one’s own context before expanding the scope to the wider world.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/01/5-charts-which-show-what-is-happening-to-the-middle-class-around-the-world/> (accessed July 18, 2018).

To do this relational and holy work well, the church and other faith-based organizations have a difficult road ahead of themselves, requiring first the desire and motivation to do the work at all. There will be many who do not wish to find a “third way” that moves out of polarization and conflict (in contrast to a compromise). This work will not be relevant to them. With that said, for those who wish to be disciples of the Good News for the sake of the world, there is a way forward.

This paper explores one option that is not a quick-fix but an invitation into a process that takes intentional commitment and willingness to change. The call here is to enter liminal space as a path forward in holy conversation, grounded in the notion of grace leading us into new movements of hope and healing locally, with an eye toward spreading the local to the global. Holy conversation includes a significant need for leaders to create time and space where disruption can occur and brave conversations are evoked. Leaders will need to know how to expand the parameters of this work beyond dominant mindsets, stereotypes, and power hierarchies into unknown, disruptive liminal territory. They will focus on inviting churches and perhaps not-for-profit organizations that wish to break apart from polarized thinking and behavior but don’t know how.

### **The Significance of Liminality**

The etymology of the word “liminal” originates in the Latin, “limen,” which means “threshold.”<sup>2</sup> Sometimes these threshold spaces are physical, called “thin places,” such as where the sea and the shore meet. Celtic lore often describes thin places as spaces where the otherworld and this world permeate each other’s boundaries. Unusual experiences can occur in thin places, including spiritual encounters, visions, transfigurations,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/liminal> (accessed July 4, 2018).

adventures, and significant transformations.<sup>3</sup> These places are liminal in nature because they do not reside in permanent or even predictable conditions.

The word “liminality” itself was coined by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep based on his study of rites of passage for the transitional stages in male lives in African and Australian tribes. In *The Rites of Passage*, van Gennep studied a pattern or process of status changes throughout the life cycle that follow a distinct set of phases: separation, transition, and incorporation.<sup>4</sup> The middle phase, transition, is the liminal period, where new and/or expanded understandings of values, abilities, and meanings for an individual are created, within the context of the tribe. More widely, van Gennep and his later students and followers claimed that life and the development of cultures is not possible without transitional spaces and times, both personal and social. Thresholds occur in every individual life as well as in whole societies, where we “go through” or bridge from one realm to another. This experience changes us, perhaps minutely or perhaps dramatically. However, the key component of crossing a threshold into unknown or new space invariably is change itself.

In the 1960s, Victor Turner took up van Gennep’s study of the rites of passage and liminality with the hope of emancipating such dehumanization, re-appropriating an understanding of threshold times and spaces as a cultural space of human creativity and agency.<sup>5</sup> Based on his research, cultural practices and values evolved organically through experiences rather than as a systematized, categorized process of development.

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<sup>3</sup> See a thorough description of thin places in the United Kingdom in Margaret Silf, *Sacred Spaces: Stations on a Celtic Way*. Oxford, England: Lion Publishing, plc, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*, English translation. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960. 11. (Original work published in French in 1909.)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

One caution must be made for those working or residing in liminal space: liminality is not to be confused with marginality. While both are boundary-based ideas, liminality is interstitial, or in-between two points, rather than outside a center. It is third space, not what some might deem “insignificant” space by which marginal space is often defined by those in dominant positions of power; however, liminal space can occur both in the margins as well as in the center of power.

For our purposes, the value of focusing on liminality as a threshold or bridge process, essentially a path of transition, is to create a holy sojourn, an adventure or pilgrimage into a space and time of relational intersection, with the risks and dangers inherent in engaging difference, while being held in a loose “container” or framework for the journey. This space is one of possibility, intersectional relationality, and meaning-creation that ultimately leads to disruption of polarizing forces and dehumanization. It creates opportunity for holy conversation that disrupts social, often uninformed classification, particularly in terms of stereotype: an implicit or explicit bias that becomes entrenched. Participants in liminal space for the purpose of holy conversation will need to suspend their own notions and values and adopt a learning posture, open to receive new experiences and ideas. Such vulnerability involves risk; it is not an easy endeavor. The hope is to move toward flourishing together rather than the “overcoming” of the other.

### **The Nature and Work of Liminal Space**

An example of intentional liminality is interim ministry, which at its core has a temporal focus. Interim ministers serve for a particular time period in congregations between one permanent pastor and the next. Everyone expects change and also an end-point. This interstitial time, or threshold work, is meant to move the congregation into its new identity with a new leader. This time can be fraught with anxiety, high activity, as

well as expectations for a new order and burgeoning hope for the future. Interim ministers find themselves paying attention to congregational norms and, if available, the incoming minister's particular approaches to worship, pastoral care, and church development. An interim leader also attempts to help the congregation self-reflect on its own beliefs and habits, particularly those that may have fostered conflict. Further, the interim is prone to hear differing views of what is necessary for the congregation's viable future. If conflict is present, it often intensifies during this liminal time.

The interim leader has a unique opportunity here to set the groundwork for holy conversation without concern of being fired; as one of my colleagues said to me when we were in interim positions, "We are pre-fired." So the interim can take different kinds of respect-filled risks to evoke shifts in long-held belief systems or in cases of conflict, invest in methods to de-polarize behaviors.<sup>6</sup> This transition time is liminal until finally, the new leader arrives, and a new normal is adopted and prevails.

This example does not constitute a rite of passage *per se*, but it does constitute in-between space with a temporal aspect that brings about change. Transformational change, the great hope for liminal space, can occur through holy conversation to bridge difference by claiming difference as a gift rather than a threat. The liminal bridging has potential to change everyone immersed in this "passage" from the old "home base" to a new one, avoiding polarization and stuckness. Such change can revitalize relationships or even point toward revolutionary shifts in power.

The value of liminality is in understanding it as a balance between two points—the limit and the limitless, perhaps better described as a finite adventure or pilgrimage where the starting point is *status quo* and the end point is a new meaning created out of the journey-experience. The in-between is the transitional, and

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<sup>6</sup> Methods are listed earlier in the article—see Dave Gray below.

hopefully, transformational space. Liminal space has a temporal aspect, a beginning and an end. In short, liminal space *is* transitional space with temporal finitude inherent to it. It is interstitial, punctuating life with a series of movements across thresholds into transition, and then arriving in a new place, figuratively or literally. In time, we face the next transition.

Further, people cannot know or describe liminality without, as Turner claims, engaging it *experientially* and subsequently, reflectively. Thus, it is the transitional experience in “contained” or framed space that is important for meaningful interaction and reflection among human beings, groups, and societies rather than orderly stages of formation. Leaders who develop intentional liminal space through containers of experience, where held-norms for all parties are suspended and openness is fostered among participants, will need to hold this container loosely but with great clarity of purpose or the meaningful work can become hijacked by agendas participants can’t quite shake.

Turner’s contemporary, pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott, used this notion of contained space for his theory of development, calling it a holding environment as a foundation for health and growth.<sup>7</sup> Robert Kegan, developmental psychologist and co-director of the Change Leadership Group, undergirds the necessity of containing spaces as necessary environments for relationship development. In *The Evolving Self*, Kegan adapts Winnicott’s understanding of embedded context as essential influence on development. Further, he claims, like Van Gennepe, that there will be series of holding environments that shape the self throughout life, which exhibit a particular process: holding on, letting go, and reintegrating.<sup>8</sup> The distinction between Van Gennepe and Winnicott/Kegan is that

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<sup>7</sup> Padel, John Hunter, in Richard L. Gregory, ed. *The Oxford Companion to the Mind*. Oxford, England: 1987. 273.

<sup>8</sup> See Kegan, Robert, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*. Boston: Harvard University Press: 1982.

*intentional* liminal space, such as in Van Gennep's time-constrained tribal rituals, is a container created for a particular developmental purpose rather than a context in which a person simply finds her- or himself.

It is easy to make over-simplified statements about the work occurring in a contained liminal space. Often the liminal period is fraught with high anxiety, conflict, and fragility, or it is at the very least deeply ambivalent. In this container, human beings question their own ethics (in short, belief systems leading to particular behaviors), perhaps refreshing them or even riskier, discarding them in light of new experience. Design Consultant Dave Gray describes the work this way: "Liminal thinking is the art of creating change by understanding, shaping, and reframing beliefs."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to say that beliefs are essential to our survival because they are tools for navigating the world through our actions. "But they also limit us. In fact, the words *liminal* and *limit* are linked; they share the same Latin root. The same boundaries that make it possible for us to think also limit what we can conceive."<sup>10</sup> Waking up to limiting beliefs opens us to new possibilities as we walk into new spaces of thinking and belief. Gray provides nine practices for changing the way we think in his book *Liminal Thinking*: assume we are not objective, empty our pre-conceived notions and open ourselves, create safe space, look at a variety of viewpoints, ask questions and connect, disrupt habits, experiment, tell and listen to stories, and self-reflect.<sup>11</sup> Holy conversation adds a spiritual focus or trust that there is more to the conversation than human efforts. Spiritual practices or rituals add sacred significance to the container for this intentional work.

Margaret Wheatley, co-founder of the Berkana Institute and long-time student of systems organization and organic development for leaders and organizations,

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<sup>9</sup> Gray, Dave. *Liminal Thinking: Create the Change You Want by Changing the Way You Think*. Brooklyn, NY: Two Waves Books, 2016. xiii.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-142.



adds to Gray's description of how to shift belief systems. She concludes in her most recent book, *Who Do We Choose to Be?*, that belief system changes are disruptive, and further, must occur locally, creating what she calls "islands of sanity."<sup>12</sup> She is quite clear that sanity or sane answers to problems will not influence decision-makers at a global level. Therefore, she invites local leaders to invoke people's sense of goodwill, generosity, and desire for community. To provide a rationale for doing so, she analyzes why the world is following a path to destruction and helps us determine what is so important about finding and, if not finding, creating liminal space for holy conversation now more than ever before. She claims that whole social and political belief systems and practices must collapse and become chaotic before we move into space that is healthier for everyone. So for her, liminal space is highly disruptive.

Everything that is held together—its beliefs, meanings, and structures—no longer work now that the environment has changed. And so the system falls apart. It descends into chaos and finally reaches a bifurcation point, where it has two choices: Either it can reorganize using new beliefs and structures that work well in the change environment. Or it can insist on the old ways, fail to reorganize itself, and die. Both rebirth and death are possible as an outcome of the passage through chaos.<sup>13</sup>

Wheatley is clear that we cannot move into more life-affirming relationships and interactions without this chaotic space, part of the liminal experience. Her aim is to find ways back to behaving sanely, with compassion and generosity, for the sake of each other and the planet. The chaotic time is

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<sup>12</sup> See Wheatley, Margaret J. *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016. 51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

...a bitter pill for activists and all people with discerning, open hearts. We understand the complexity of the global problems, we have thought systemically to define root causes, we have proposed meaningful solutions, but we are impotent to influence those in power who ignore our efforts. The powerful always defend the status quo, because it is the source of their power and privilege. Any change that benefits others would destroy their position.<sup>14</sup>

As Wheatley calls for islands of sanity, she faces the reality of our era and challenges leaders to choose who they wish to be in these chaotic times. Indeed, traversing liminal space with mind wide open is essential for leaders to develop their answers to this very question of identity.

The risk found in liminal spaces is the possibility of the community engaged in the contained, yet organic work becoming its own deeply-connected group, which can choose a path of loving care or contrarily, one of destruction. Much depends on intent and parameters of the container held by its leader (for example, tribal expectations of the path from boyhood to manhood in a rite of passage determine beginning and end points as parameters of the immersion in the wilderness). Whatever the liminal experience, the suspension of normal order into transitional space and time is intended at experience-end to return to a condition of relative stability and normality, a new “home” or structure, albeit with a change of identity, status, and/or values. Hence, its interstitial nature.

This description begs the question of whether liminal space can be permanent. The answer is yes, liminal space can be permanent, but mostly to detrimental effect. The paradox of permanent transition (even if geographic location keeps changing) can lead to harm. Liminal space-time is not meant to be a permanent state for those doing maturing or soul-work or depolarizing through dialectic

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 10.

engagement. Groups immerse in interstitial space with its temporal component, the transition experience between two stable points. Then, at the point of stability, participants reflect about new understandings of meaning and resulting ethics. In time, moving across another threshold marks the next transition. In essence, the intent is not to dwell in liminal space forever, though groups can immerse in such space often, unless they become fixed or stuck in such a state, resulting in a permanent suspension where liminality becomes the *modus operandi* for life itself. This stuckness stems from loss of meaning in the transition, but seeks to live in it without being grounded in a “home” (stability) at any time. It is permanent transience by choice. Examples of this permanent suspension eschew rites of passage, end points, reflection points, and a time set apart time for the passage itself; heavy gambling, constant pursuit of entertainment, gratuitous violence and gratuitous sex, repeated, perhaps obsessive pursuit of extreme adventure with high-risk danger “just to say I did it,” as well as early-phase addiction behaviors all point toward this loss of meaning and un-grounding from anchor points that define the containers for liminal space. Even monastics who are preparing constantly for separation without *arriving* at the new state of monastic life can be considered stuck in permanent liminality. In other words, the separation phase occurs, the transition never becomes complete, and incorporation back into community or self in a new, more mature, different role is never realized. Life becomes a surface carnival,<sup>15</sup> or an exercise in despair filled with constant, mind-numbing entertainment, self-anesthetization, or never-ending posturing to impress others.

Fostering holy conversation for the sake of living meaningful and holy lives requires intentional entry into liminal space of relationship with people we normally would not engage. To model this willingness, to

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11.

undertake it, and to do the work, sets forth a way of life that can and should ripple through all contexts. Perhaps such an endeavor could be modeled clearly by the church as a new norm across denominations and locations rather than as episodic occurrence. What better form of love for neighbors than to see and hear them clearly, with respect rather than judgment? To accept, if not celebrate, diversity? To create a pilgrimage together for a time and see what emerges from our learning postures along the way? Once such things can occur *regularly* in a small group, and another small group, and then another, there is potential to create a matrix of intention that counters the self-serving, the violence, and the polarization that leads to ongoing destruction. Holy conversation, as manifests itself in a desire to love, or at least respect neighbor builds up, rather than declares war on the other. Liminal space provides opportunity to grow in love even in the midst of disagreement. Holy conversation overcomes self-satisfaction and power-mongering. It disrupts and then widens and deepens perspectives. It leads to transitions that call us to a series of transformations throughout our lives, and indeed, throughout the centuries of the church's life.

### **Intention to Create Liminality**

Return to van Gennep's descriptions of liminal space as intentional rites of passage developed in tribal community for boys. Van Gennep describes tribal rituals where boys were removed from the safety of the village and sent out on their own into the wilderness to learn survival in order to become men through experience and learned wisdom. Upon their return, they would be welcomed back with a new identity, having learned to brave the wilderness and survive, if not thrive, as differentiated adults.<sup>16</sup> There were particular

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, moving from girlhood to becoming a woman was tied to bodily function than a ritualized sending out, but even then girls were presented with their own rituals/rites of passage as they grew into women. The different gender journeys and role-expectations are the subject of much

understandings about how this *dangerous* liminal space and time were to be encountered (contained) on a personal level, while acknowledging the necessity of the passage back into the community.<sup>17</sup> If boys were not able to survive in the wild, they either died, were shunned, or returned in shame to the community without change in status.<sup>18</sup> What differs here from the container for holy conversation is that the separation of the unsuccessful boy from his role in the tribe was permanent on a physical or psychological level. This rite of passage was a ritual for the community, imbued with a holy understanding of how tribes preserved and advanced their leadership and belief systems from their ancestors' times to the present day.

Turner expanded van Gennepe's work in several ways, notably by naming the religious nature of all ritual, which involves social experience and a body of systematic beliefs upon which the participants depend; in other words, he claimed that ritual has ontological value.<sup>19</sup> It is the focus on belief systems that is important for the work of holy conversation. What is useful here is Bjørn Thomassen's work this century with both van Gennepe's patterns of ritual and Turner's expansion of ritual meaning. Thomassen himself further expands notions of liminality that not only ring true for rites of passage and dialogical de-polarization, but also more widely for our modern times. He suggests that liminality's space and time elements can be expanded to "types," which work in combinations. Liminality can be experienced by three sets

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feminist critique of biological destiny, with which I agree but cannot cover here.

<sup>17</sup> Girls had their own rituals, but were not sent off into the wilderness to survive. They were nurtured into household/private realm roles, with marriage and motherhood rituals cementing the hierarchical and traditional values of the tribe.

<sup>18</sup> Some of the Boy Scout rituals in the U.S. have similar status changes incorporated into them, especially as boys attempt to reach the highest designation of the scouting tradition: Eagle Scout.

<sup>19</sup> Turner, Victor W. *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975. 31-32.

of subjects: single individuals; social groups (cohorts/minorities); and whole societies, populations, and civilizations. The temporal dimension of liminality can be experienced in moments, periods, and epochs (decades, generations, and he argues, also centuries). He posits that when one begins to question values and ethics (belief systems), one is entering liminal space.<sup>20</sup>

Entering liminal space through questioning can be applied to groups as well. Groups intentionally can celebrate rituals or calendar events that can occur for short or extended periods of time. Societies can face sudden, surprising events or longer-term wars with enduring instability, also for great periods of time—liminal transition.<sup>21</sup> Thus, liminal space can be an intentional creation, such as for rites of passage that include a sending out and receiving home or a container in which people examine their own belief systems. At a macro-level, they can also determine the course of history either via great upheaval through natural disaster or as human capabilities and values change. In the latter instance, macro-level change tends to start at the micro-level or locally, and we circle back again to the group work of changing belief systems necessary for telescoping out meaningful change in the world.

There are also unintentional liminal spaces<sup>22</sup> that are created by unexpected forces of nature, human-induced or otherwise, such as earthquakes, hurricanes, or floods, that disrupt daily life until a new normal can be realized. Trauma also is a potential unintentional liminal space as persons' lives are disrupted by suffering and pain. But liminal spaces can be—and should be—created intentionally for the sake of transformational journeying, or pilgrimage, with a purpose. The container must hold parameters for positive engagement and learning while

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<sup>20</sup> Thomassen, 89.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> This article will not discuss unintentional liminality at any length due to the limits of its purview.

allowing for adventure, surprise, and even the emergence of new vision altogether.

In order to lead into liminal space intentionally for the purpose of holy conversation and engaging difference for the purpose of de-polarization and mutual growth, leadership itself must be grounded in authentic experience of liminal territory. Leaders who have not experienced and reflected seriously on the nature of transition from one point to another in spiritual, economic, career, rite of passage, or psychological terms, may need to find guidance for intentionally immersing themselves in transformational liminality. For example, liminal space is particularly potent and ripe for a transitional path or event after a leader experiences some kind of significant failure or failing. What does one do after living with failure or a characteristic leading to a series of failings? Entering the reflective space to do the grief work and then transition to a new “normal” is essential for anyone who wishes to lead authentically from their own experience by “holding a container” for others.

The liminality of gathered groups who pursue holy conversation occurs on two concurrent levels. First, on a wide level, the process of holy conversation as transition itself might be called long-term “liminal” time, beginning by crossing the threshold into intentional dialogue/soul-work after recognizing God’s invitation to love neighbor *and* enemy along with the acceptance of the possibility to do so. Once this initial threshold has been crossed, the process of long-term personal and social development in faith based on what God does *in* us rather than *for* us, begins. Possibility to move beyond polarization into adventure of difference opens. Second, and on a deeper, more intensive level, such liminal space for God’s work and human response is created in containers, or spaces where there are parameters for dialogue and opportunities to express bravely one’s own views and to show respect for another’s.

What matters for relationship-bridging across difference, whether locally or more widely, is the

intentional invitation into the contained space so that we are not reactive when we face human challenges, polarization, or natural catastrophe. Instead, we adopt the learning posture as a path of positive transformation (van Genne) on an ontological level (Turner), bridging the *status quo* to a new “home base.” This transition is the leader’s goal and she or he directs enough attention to the process to invite safety and challenge in appropriate proportion.

### **Urgency in Our Age**

There is great value in creating containers for holy conversation among people bringing diverse cultures, socio-economic locations, their own intersectionality, and belief-systems to the table. The local purpose is to deepen Christian holy conversation in well-led, contained groups. Likewise, there is room for deepened holiness in this day and age as we continue to live in what might be called by Thomassen a liminal era of competing values at local, national, and global levels. But we have significant and deep work to do because we are in grave peril as human beings and more alarming, as a whole planet. Polarization divides and conquers, which only leads to more destructive conflict and concentration of power in the hands of the few. Faith-based leaders, among others, must find a different way forward, which necessitates initial work at the local level among those who desire to change the trajectory of extreme oppositional ethics and politics.

Creating a container complete with ritual or practice provides us with an alternative opportunity for exploring human and planetary intersections on personal and community levels: how is complexity of our identities and values made manifest in our relationships? How do we understand alterity? In what ways are we privileged? In what ways are we not? How do we ourselves demonize the Other? What are we afraid of? To create brave space that has some rudimentary safety built into it for small groups to examine diversity, and to learn to value it in



new ways, is the only way to break free from our stuckness. Such liminal space provides a bridge from dehumanizing polarization to adventuresome, hopeful engagement.

For Christians, liminal space helps persons and groups cross the threshold into loving critical engagement about life, faith-based ethics, and spiritual development that calls for social transformation. Such an intentional container for meeting together necessitates attention to the spiritual life so that we are guided by the Great Commandment as we move into the risky space of encountering “other.” Theoretically, this encounter sounds like a beautiful relationship just waiting to blossom. In reality, conflicting views of what it means to be neighbor, what it means to act for social justice, and what values guide ethical decision-making depend on social location and theological worldview. Liminal space, in containers that share common ritual or practices, allows a framework for difficult conversations that address hegemony, patriarchy, very different theological worldviews, and economic, racial, gender, sexual, and social displacement. Participants can expect anger, confusion, sorrow, and temptations to abandon the dialogue in frustration. The common thread is desire for a better future than what the vast majority of the world’s population is experiencing now, including fostering and supporting more interconnected, agile, active leaders who actually care about humanity beyond their own tribes and who care about the planet itself.

Liminal space must also have its closure. Toward what are we aiming? Basic rights for all people as the foundation for God’s love? Perhaps so, but the local work must set its sights at its own level. Globalization has been celebrated deeply in the 1990s by opening boundaries and eschewing limits. The backlash of the 2010s and surely into the 2020s is resulting in protectionism and a renewal of dehumanization for the sake of concentrated power “over” based on “othering.” The pendulum swings too wildly. We already know there

needs to be a spiritual focus and a clear path forward for bridging relational gaps between conflicted parties. This focus could only occur effectively in relationship, with intention and sometimes tension. These holy conversations occur in relationship that need boundaries, a self-differentiation while also retaining intention to stay together in community.

### **Holding the Container**

Holy conversations, led effectively and held loosely but with clarity of purpose, are bridging conversations in liminal space. Further, when the space is no longer “held” in container, there must be another place to call “home” where one can rest and be whole rather than fragmented and permanently disconnected. Groups intent on holy conversation can be these liminal spaces, the transformational containers where human beings can speak about their spiritual lives and question our beliefs. Gatherings can be punctuation points of the week that looked closely at daily lives and the life of the spirit.

Providing loose structure does not negate creativity or the movement of the holy conversation. In fact, ritual itself can provide frameworks for significant revelation and creative expression while holding the boundary safely and loosely around participants as they cross the threshold into adventuresome space. Ritual, as demarcations of rites of passage, as habits for gathering, or as Sunday morning communal devotion, keeps community together despite difference and in best case scenarios, in celebration of it. Ritual does not have to be “high church” or “low church,” or really church at all. It simply is commitment to gathering within a covenantal community with particular norms of behavior held by the leader so that the unexpected can arise without complete pandemonium. Rituals also move us in and out of spaces or zones, with an expectation that we can move safely in and through the thresholds of these spaces. When hard work of dialogue is invited, the container must be space that attempts safety so that brave conversation actually

can occur. Participants who can be vulnerable and express their anger and hurt, while being well-listened-to, are far more likely to sustain relationships and work toward restorative justice than those who cannot step onto the bridge at all. In this space, mindset evolves. Ethics move. Complexity is embraced. Everyday life operates on a different plane each time transition is experienced. As relationships deepen, liminal space becomes a familiar pattern of interstitial punctuations necessary for an evolving life-journey.

## Conclusion

Some bridging, holy conversations have been occurring of late as antidote to polarization. Christians ourselves have always had the call to be counter-moving, particularly when secular society is driven by dominant powers and principalities that seem to focus on greed and personal gain. With practice, the holy conversations aiming toward change should widen beyond the church. Such conversations however must be able to address the suspicions we hold of each other as “other,” must not assume the worst in the “other,” and must be approached with the intention of connection identified in the Great Commandment. Without these authentic intentions, there is little likelihood of finding a way forward in such vulnerable space. So it is essential to be in covenant together as a leader holds the container during the difficult unveiling of our deepest angers and fears. It will require trusted leadership to hold this container honestly and consistently. With this practice, this experience of liminality for transitional identity as van Gennepp, Turner, and Thomassen would have it, individuals and groups have potential to experience a deep maturing through holy conversation. Ritual has potential to draw people together more deeply as the bridge-work continues.

A renewed quest for re-grounding in the Source of our being is emerging in response to the destructive hegemonic tendencies of the political and socio-economic world. Counter to the polarization we face are

movements for people to rekindle spirituality, especially evident in church expansion in the global East and South. While greed and prosperity gospel are present in the church, there also is a desire to experience authentic relationship in communities that celebrate and honor what is different.<sup>23</sup> There will always be those who do not wish to divert from personal or national power-gathering, but there seems to be a significant segment of the population searching for a more faithful and life-giving way. Covenantal containers within the church, the academy, and other organizations, can indeed be established by skilled leaders on a regular basis. Ritual and covenantal commitments in liminal space need to be developed for difficult, brave conversation engaging intersectionalities of difference and commonality as a Christian response to the Great Commandment.

Creating liminal space also provides a model for civil discourse in the secular arena regarding politics, social and economic stress, as well as racial and gender discord. Holy conversation and the liminal bridge, in whatever context this connection is made, is a hopeful strategy for fostering equitable, sustainable communities and practicing the deepest nature of humanity's call to love neighbor, enemy, and the planet.

It is a lot of work to cross thresholds and enter uncertain space. Such an act of faith requires risk. Without this act, this first step into the unknown of holy conversation, we may not be able to work with God to save our species and the planet because we will continue to contribute to their destruction. Solidarity, punctuated by liminal space immersions for holy conversation, brings hope alive again, one-by-one, spreading into the world.

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<sup>23</sup> Some of these observations stem from my conversations with younger generations in the seminary and also in a variety of churches. Further, see Linda Mercadante's studies on the SBNRs (spiritual but not religious) in *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Finally, there is growing interest in the U.S. and Europe in New Age rituals, which often are modern replications of older rituals, where people are finding community and meaning.