

“Liminality”
A Sermon by
The Reverend Bill Clark
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On March ninth, nineteen hundred and fifty-two at approximately 11:55 in the morning, Ruth Clark gave birth to her fifth child. The infant weighed in at five pounds and three ounces and measured 18 inches in length. It was stated the child possessed a rather homely expression, which, was accented, by a pair of strikingly deep blue eyes and a head of curly light brown hair.

The birth, of this her second son, was a much celebrated arrival. Three previous births produced wonderful and loving daughters bringing her and her husband much joy and laughter.

However now, they had felt it was time for them to have a little brother. This is what she and her husband had prayed and wished for. Their prayers, it seemed had been answered.

On its second day of life, the child began to choke and turn blue from lack of oxygen. An attentive nurse at Norwalk General Hospital rushed to the aide of the choking infant. She was able to stabilize him, but the baby remained in critical condition. Ruth had to leave her new born son in the hospital until he grew stronger. The nurse later informed Ruth that she had not only revived the choking infant but she took it upon herself to baptize the baby in fear of its early passing.

This was the first rite of passage for the young infant, later baptized a second time in the Roman Catholic Church. He was christened William Loydon Clark.

This story told and retold to me by my mother always made a significant impression on my young mind. An unknown nurse had saved my life? Who was she? Where was she? Was I really baptized twice? COOL! Does that give me extra pull come judgment day – a bigger room perhaps in the heavenly paradise? And what compelled her to baptize me? What if she hadn’t seen me? What if she was late for work or sick that day? What if? What if? What if? I would generally cease my enquiries there. This incident I have come to realize was my first rite of passage – my first threshold moment – a crossing over. Liminality entered my life at a very early age.

“Liminality,” states author and UU minister Robert Fulghum, is the word for the threshold moment. It stems from the Latin word *limin*, meaning the center of a doorway. Liminality is the moment of crossing over. It **describes the transitional phase of personal change, when one is neither** in an old state of being nor a new and not quite aware of the implication of the event. “All stages of life,” states Fulghum include liminality.

All stages of life include liminality. Now as we glance back over our own personal geography’s I am sure each and every one of us would be able to remember certain moments of liminality – those moments or events of importance that happen to us either for the first time or perhaps only once in our lifetime. Now we may not recognize these moments as they occur as moments of liminality – this happens later when we are able to see these moments as important to our general pattern of life. It is hindsight or retrospect when these liminal moments provide for us a transformation from one stage of being to another in this incredible cycle of life.

Rites of passage, transformation, change, movement would all be words I would align with the experiences of liminality. The inertia or power which propels the liminal experience then, would be the creative process of living – the process of living and acknowledging lives transformative elements permits us the freedom to approach each threshold moment with openness and awareness. This allows for us the opportunity of coming to the edge, crossing over the threshold and experiencing the blessings of passage. The everyday living and changing in the cycle of life provides for us many moments of liminality.

In the performance piece you saw this morning you were able to witness specific moments of liminality. In fact, the entire choreography of the piece is centered on these moments. The first step a child takes – riding your first bicycle – your first hit on a baseball team – your first crush – your first date may all be considered moments of liminality – they are threshold moments when we cross over to something new, something transformational.

We then have more ritualized threshold moments and rites of passage – like marriages and giving birth. Then there is retirement, becoming grandparents, the

loss of a spouse. All of these would be considered moments of liminality. Within the framework of these individual events may occur other threshold moments as well.

During this mornings performance each and every time Leslie and I made that turn, when we walked in that circle, moving or changing from one phase of life to the other – it was a turn toward the limin, toward the center line of the next doorway, a turn towards a threshold moment. It was a turn to liminality. “Stitching these moments together into a comforting quilt of wisdom, is the task of one’s later years,” Fulghum states.

Performing this pantomime awakened in me certain memoires of those threshold moments. One in particular occurred as I was the young child playing baseball.

I had registered to play in the summer little leagues teams. I can clearly recall the das leading up to the games as extremely frieghtening ones. Baseball was not one, how do I say this, well it was not one of my favored past times. However, much to my chagrin, I was actually at it. So good in fact that I played first base. I have those clear memories of being the first baseman, with the opposing team member getting a single, being on first base – taking his lead to second – the pitcher giving me one of the side stares – you know attempting to catch the runner off the base – there I stood thinking he was going to throw the ball – and me just shaking my head – like no no don’t throw it – out of totalu fear I would drop it – the runner would steal second and so forth. Feared ruled by ability to play.

Anyway my fielding skills were basically good. Batting however proved to be a bit of a challenge. It was like everytime I got up to bat I would strile out. It got to the point when it was my turn to bat I would approach the plate – I could hear the groans of my teammates – “Oh, no, Billy is up.”

All of that changed one day when after a game the coach, in attempting to help me improve mu skill suggested I try to bat left handed.

“But I’m not left handed. I am right handed,” I replied. J

“Just try it and see what happens,” he encourage me.

The first few times proved to be unsuccessful until about the third pitch I suddenly let lookse with a hit that made my mouth drop open. I just stood there and watched it go!

“Run Billy,” the coach shouted. “Remember to run.” I think I began to slowly walk to first base dragging the bat in disbelief waiting to see where the ball would land. From that moment on I became a left-handed hitter. It was a moment of crossing over – it was a moment of liminality.

I became a little wiser that day.

It is with the passage of time accompanied with the overall opportunity to connect a given moment to the general geography of our own life that a threshold moment is understood. I did not clearly understand the significance of this little league event until I performed this mime for the first time. Then it became a moment of liminality.

It is with the comprehension of that connect along with the movement forward – the movement of crossing over the thresholds where the gifts of life are found. The connection and comprehension of our moments of liminality are the forces which propel us forward in this sacred journey we call life. Author Claire Morris states it this way; “When we walk on the edge of all we know and take one step into the darkness of the unknown – one of two things will happen – either there will be something solid for us to stand on or we will be taught to fly.” Moments of liminality may be considered flying lessons as well.

Soren Kierkegaard once wrote: “philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other clause that it must be lived forward.”

And it is forward that we must venture. Life and time are forever moving us in that forward direction. We are continually entering new passages experiencing new thresholds, reaching new heights. Moments of liminality are occurring throughout all of our life time. The process of creativity and productivity does not stop at any one point in the cycle. Life is forever tugging at our shirtsleeves, our apron strings, our three piece suits, dresses, uniforms and ministerial robes – begging us to continue to the joyful gifts of this life. **Live! Live! Live!** Is the inherent cry of the soul. Life is indeed a journey – a journey of passage and moments that are forever turning – forever changing and forever transforming. All stages of life include liminality.

You know I must be honest with you here and tell you this is not the first time I have given this sermon. I initially wrote it twenty years ago when I turned 45. At that time I came across a quote from Gail Sheehy's book; *New Passages: Mapping Your Life Across Time*. In it she states; "Stop and recalculate – imagine the day you turn 45 as the infancy another life. I found those words comforting twenty years ago – as Sheehy proclaimed an infancy of my second adulthood.

However, as many of you know this past March I turned sixty-five years old – and I am still struggling. I mean truly struggling so much that I had to leave the country to celebrate it. It just sounded old – to me! Older than I ever thought I would be. Although in a recent conversation with one of our Coming of age youth – he politely asked me how old I was. Since at this age there is no excuse in lying – and after all I am his minister – I said I was 65! The look on his face was priceless! His eyes opened wide as his eyebrows shot way up and his mouth opened wide – no way he said! You can't be. You seem so younger – you dress so young. Now mind you this is from a thirteen year olds perspective – but hey – I will take it. Still as I stopped once again to recalculate I realized I am in the middle of my second adult hood. Life is still unfolding before me. I am not where I thought I would be at this stage – but I am here. (God an doorway story)

In the early stages of my second adulthood I survived heart surgery and a heart attack @ 55! I survived too many hospitalizations and I survived resigning from parish ministry.

Now in the elder stages of my second adult hood I have been given an opportunity to recreate myself anew. I have stepped through the limin fo a doorway called illness and disease and given the grateful chance of recreate and redesign this stage of my second adult hood in a whole and holy new way. It was not what I imagined it would be. Yet it is another fortuitous time of liminality.

In Sheehy's book she describes her idea of adult life begins with the provisional adult hood from the ages of 18- 35. Do we have any provisional adults here today? Your first adult hood is from 35-45. Ow many first adult hoods here? And the second adult hood from 45-85. How many second adulthoods do we have? From forty-five si the passage of mastery and from 50 -60 the age of integrity. She labels them the flaming fifties; serene sixties; the sage seventies; the uninhibited eighties, the noble nineties and the celebratory centenarians.

Life my friends, goes on and on and on. There are passages to go through and doorways to cross you never imagined existed.

There is a wonderful story from Jewish mythology, which tells of a man who had served many valuable years as advisor to a King. Now politics being what they were one day the man fell seriously out of favor – so serious that the king sent for his advisors and declared the man would be put to death. However, because of the advisor's long years of service the King told him he would be given the honor of choosing in what way he was to die. The advisor did not waste such an opportunity. He thought carefully. Finally he looked at the King, "Very well your majesty," the advisor agreed with a slight smile, "I choose to die of old age."

I, too, want to die of old age. I want to continue to walk through the doorway after doorway crossing moments of liminality and stitch together my own comforting quilt of wisdom. Now naturally there will be challenges, both physical and mental in reaching these heights of wisdom. And this culture imparts needs to learn more hard lessons on the value and worth of those in their second childhood. Ageism runs deep throughout our society. However, if we were to see the aging process as not leading to death's door – rather as the opportunity to cross the limens of many doorways allowing renewal and transformation into new passages and stages – life would be an unfolding path of awakening. An awakening where we would learn to respond to each other with love and compassion for the distance we have traveled and not with rejection and fear. The power of our survival lies within the unity of our living – our living together within the turning of this cycle of mystery and wonder.

It is my hope and prayer to follow the mystery and to enjoy the passing of time. It is my hope and prayer to learn from the nobles and sages in this church community. To spend some time with the elders and learn of their journeys. And I invite you to do the same. Listen to the voices and experiences of those in another phase of life. If you are in your provisional adulthood spend some time with someone in the second adulthood. If you are a teenager share moments of liminality with a person in their first stage of adulthood. Share, listen and learn

from the vast resources we have here on this Island and in the UU Society of Martha's Vineyard.

We do have a great gift here. We have each other. We have each other to stand with at those threshold moments – to hold that heavy quilt of aged wisdom. We have each other to witness the births and deaths, those changes and transformations. We have each other to share our journey's of sacred highs and lows in this cycle of community life.

It reminds me of a story that took place at the Special Olympics in Seattle. Perhaps you have heard it before.

There were none contestants, a;; persons with physical or mental disabilities assembled at the starting line for the one hundred yard dash. At the gun they all started out – not exactly in a dash – but with the relish to run the race and win. All that is except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt at the starting block – after a few steps – fumbled over a few times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and paused. Then they all turned around and went back. Everyone of them. One girl with Down Syndrome bent over and kissed him and said, "Maybe this will make it better." Then all nine of them linked arms and walked to the finish line.

My friends, this is what the journey of life offer us. This is what being a part of this church community offers us – a slow arm and arm walk through the many cycles of life. We walk together on this journey. Linked by the meditations of our hearts and the wisdom of our years. Linked by the liminal moments of passage and change. So together may we awaken to the blessedness of life and may our spirits continue their flight supported on the wings of wisdom and grace.