

Liminal Space by Richard Rohr

Between Two Worlds

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Liminal space is an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in new ways. It is where we are betwixt and between, having left one room or stage of life but not yet entered the next. We usually enter liminal space when our former way of being is challenged or changed—perhaps when we lose a job or a loved one, during illness, at the birth of a child, or a major relocation. It is a graced time, but often does not feel “graced” in any way. In such space, we are not certain or in control. This global pandemic we now face is an example of an immense, collective liminal space.

The very vulnerability and openness of liminal space allows room for something genuinely new to happen. We are empty and receptive—erased tablets waiting for new words. Liminal space is where we are most teachable, often because we are most humbled. Liminality keeps us in an ongoing state of shadowboxing instead of ego-confirmation, struggling with the hidden side of things, and calling so-called normalcy into creative question.

It’s no surprise then that we generally avoid liminal space. Much of the work of authentic spirituality and human development is to get people into liminal space and to keep them there long enough that they can learn something essential and new. Many spiritual giants like St. Francis, Julian of Norwich, Dorothy Day, and Mohandas Gandhi tried to live their entire lives in permanent liminality, on the edge or periphery of the dominant culture. This in-between place is free of illusions and false payoffs. It invites us to discover and live from broader perspectives and with much deeper seeing.

In liminal space we sometimes need to not-do and not-perform according to our usual successful patterns. We actually need to fail abruptly and deliberately falter to understand other dimensions of life. We need to be silent instead of speaking, experience emptiness instead of fullness, anonymity instead of persona, and pennilessness instead of plenty. In liminal space, we descend and intentionally do not come back out or up immediately. It takes time but this experience can help us re-enter the world with freedom and new, creative approaches to life.

I imagine that even if you’ve never heard the word *liminal* before, you likely have a sense of what I’m talking about. It would be difficult to exist in this time of global crisis and not feel caught between at least two worlds—the one we knew and the one to come. Our consciousness and that of future generations has been changed. We cannot put the genie back in the bottle.

Reference:

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Adam’s Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation* (The Crossroad Publishing Company: 2004), 135–138.