

**The Grace Within the Waiting**  
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It's only recently that I discovered the word "liminal," but I immediately recognized its meaning, resonating with all of its beautiful ambiguity; its ability to convey both extreme depth and acute now-ness, its call to settle *within* the tension, within the waiting, its insistence on surrender to the unknowing. I picture the word itself in my mind – liminal - the L on either end standing straight, grounded and supportive, holding the space between; looking at it, you can see that when you leave one guidepost, inevitably you will at some point come to another, and when you reach that next bit of solid ground, liminality will recede for a moment or a day or a year. Having let go of what's been, you move past the first L and into the transformational threshold that liminal represents, not yet ready for what's next – there are lessons to learn here, tools to gather, grieving to be done, grace to be found. Within this groundless unknowing, between those defining points of A and B, you are called to pure presence, absolute awareness. It's terrifying, it's thrilling, it takes your breath away and leaves you gasping, grasping for something safe and familiar.

Liminal spaces. Thresholds. Moments of waiting, of change. They take many forms, come at any time, can last for minutes, days, or years.

February is liminal – laying between the darkest days of winter and the coming warmth of Spring. As we move into the Lenten season, waiting for Easter, we enter another liminal time, a time of reflection and repentance, a time of preparing for the promise of new life.

When we gather here on Sundays, today, into this beloved community, we worship together, using ritual, rhetoric, silence and song to create a sacred liminal space. You come in, sit in these pews, trusting in this place, this community to open yourself up, for a brief time, to something

new, an unknown, and hopefully you will be moved, transformed in small or large ways and at the end of this hour, you are sent back out into the world with new insights to help guide your way, new tools in caring for your spirit, new hope in a shared vision and purpose, and renewed energy to serve others.

Liminality occurs all throughout our lives – weddings, graduations, falling in love and getting our hearts broken, birth, death and at hundreds of times in between. All of these are thresholds, times of change. Times of waiting.

Why, you may be wondering, am I talking about waiting and thresholds and liminality today? We, in this country, are in a major transition. As we move from Obama's presidency into Trump's, there are many unknowns, a lot of fear and anger, and waiting – waiting to see what will happen next, waiting to see how our lives will be affected and the lives of those we love, waiting to see how our faith and our values will call us to action in the coming weeks, months, and years.

But Shay, you say, what do these threshold places have to do with salvation and healing?

I'm convinced some of the most powerful moments of healing occur within these liminal times.

Powerful moments of grace. In liminal times, we are vulnerable, whether we realize it or not.

We are perhaps, confused, a little lost, a little scared. Maybe a little broken, grieving what's been left behind. And when we are raw this way, grace can be a sweet, soothing balm. A brief flicker of light. A shot of adrenaline. A precious gift. And in these things we can find healing.

Grace has the power to transform us, our circumstances, our surroundings, and our perceptions – and it has the power to heal us. That transformation and healing can be found within the waiting if only we are quiet enough to hear it, awake enough to see it, brave enough to accept it.

Sometimes, liminality is very apparent. You know very clearly that you have left that first L far behind and are deep in the middle of the unknowing. Local poet Barbara Crooker has a poem in which she illustrates this very clearly. She says, “sometimes we lie in the hammock, caught between the mesh of rope and the net of stars, suspended.”

Sometimes, like coming to worship on Sundays or going to college, we intentionally enter liminal space.

But at other times, it’s not so easy to recognize. Other times it’s not clear that you’ve moved into the unknown. Again, this is where grace can be very helpful. It can wake us up, shake us up, and help us to see things in a whole new way that, in the end, may actually be the light that shows us the path to the other side.

One of my first memories is of going to the hospital, holding tightly to my dad’s hand, walking down the long, bright hallway, unsure of what I would see when we got to the end, but I had been waiting a looong time for this day. I had been promised something amazing, something I couldn’t even imagine. But the hospital, I didn’t know that place. The surprise was supposed to be at home, it was supposed to come home, but dad said it wasn’t ready for that yet – soon.

“Hush, Shay.”

“We have to be quiet. Look!”

And he lifted my little two and a half year old body up, held me tightly against his chest and pointed through the big pane of glass in front of us.

“There. See? Look, it’s your baby sister.”

A baby sister! But that doesn't look like what I thought a baby sister would look like. Can we take her home now?

"Soon," he said, and I went still in his arms, staring at the wiggling, crying baby and knowing somewhere in my little heart that she was a blessing (despite becoming the bane of my existence a few years later). A moment of grace – that first look with new eyes. I saw my sister for the first time and knew life from this moment on was going to be very different.

How do we recognize the thresholds we are crossing? How do we see the gifts that wait within? First, it requires presence. The more we can learn to become aware of what is happening *now*, the better able we are to recognize liminal experiences and accept the growth and gifts they offer. For me, in order to recognize when I am in these times of transition and waiting I have to slow down, take a breath, check in with myself. I have to take a moment to focus and really open my eyes to what's happening within me and around me. When I do this, I see that I'm on a journey to somewhere new. I also see that grace is all around me.

Last Fall, after three years in seminary I was unsure, confused. This formation process was hard, and for what? Where would I be at the end of it all? Who would I be? Could I do it?

Several years of waiting, working – a threshold experience if ever there was one, a liminal space intent upon transformation. My transformation. When I started this journey I had truly stepped away from that first L, leaving behind all that I knew and was deep in the middle of liminality. I couldn't even see the distant L. I had no idea where I was headed or what was coming next.

I had lost my footing, drifted from my center, was suspended and tangled up in the unknowing.

I was scared.

So I did what any self-defined contemplative mystic would do – I went on a retreat.

And I slowed down long enough to listen.

And I heard, remembered, the heartbeat of the Earth, the breathing of the trees, these things that surround me, ground me, always, if I just remember to listen.

And I was told, by that still, small voice within me, reminded, that all I need is within me, that this journey to ministry has been twenty years in the making, not two, and I have gained skills, formed community, found wisdom. These are my center – at the core of who I am. I am not alone and I am ready to be a minister.

I was told that this liminal space, this waiting, this training, is just another opportunity for me to learn and grow, to become more of who I am. And when it gets scary and I feel lost, I just have to listen – a moment of grace occurs – and I hear what I need to hear.

So. Presence. Liminality calls us to presence – waking and opening ourselves up enough to see. And it calls us to stillness – if only for a breath or two – stillness in order to listen. Listen and hear.

And then.

Here's the really hard one, at least for me.

Liminality calls us to courage. The ability to act despite fear. When we know that we are waiting for change, heading for something different, about to encounter something very new, sometimes the liminal space can actually feel safe. Or at least, less scary. Because here, in the

liminal space, if we look really hard, if we squint our eyes we can still see the outline of the first L. Where we started. What we've left. What we're moving away from. And as long as we can still see it, it gives us something familiar to hang on to. Because even if we're excited about what's next. Even if this threshold is chosen. Even if it's leading to greater joy. It can still be scary. So scary.

But if there's one thing I've learned about liminality, it's that it's always unpredictable and uncontrollable, tossing me one way and then the other, so that I never really know what's coming, but I do know the other side is coming whether I want it to or not.

However.

Rather than just letting the liminal space toss me around. Rather than letting fear get the better of me – and this is the moment where everything that is possible within the waiting can become reality – I control what I do with what I've learned. How I enter what's next is my choice. And the courage it takes to turn my attention from what's behind me to what's ahead, to turn with open eyes, open arms, open heart – that courage is given wings by the grace I find within the waiting.

This is especially true now, in a time when the economic and political climate of our country are putting pressure on a multitude of social justice issues. How we enter this time of change is up to us. We can choose to enter with courage and grace, despite the unknown and the fear.

As Rilke says, “At present I need to just live the question. Perhaps I will gradually, without even noticing it, find myself experiencing the answer, some distant day.”

Ten years ago my dad was coming to the end of a three year fight with pancreatic cancer. It had been three years of waiting – some days better, some days worse – but he had been pretty sick for most of that time. Liminal time. The final threshold, and we were waiting with him, my family. There were many moments of grace, all the good days, the way he rallied enough to fly to Vegas for my sister’s wedding, the early retirement party and the support of colleagues and former students from his thirty years of teaching.

Our relationship had been complicated during my early adulthood and my decision to move back to North Dakota to be with my parents during this time was just as complicated.

Oh, that liminal space.

On top of all this, I had decided, in the middle of the three years, in the middle of North Dakota, to come out. Maybe not the best timing.

That decision meant more pain and struggle, for myself and my family. They didn’t understand but they loved me - that was never in doubt. But it was still hard.

So, ten years ago I had met someone and I was leaving town to spend a few days with her. My dad’s health had been declining rapidly at this point and we were all aware that the end was near, so I was hesitant to go, especially because my attempts to talk with my parents about this new relationship had been....awkward.

The morning before my flight I went up to their house, still unsure about leaving and feeling pretty torn up about it all.

I walked into the house, saw my dad looking...not well, and said, “I’m not going.”

He grabbed my hands and pulled me to my knees in front of his chair.

And he gave me his blessing. Wished for me happiness and love. Told me to go, explore, find joy.

They were the last words he ever spoke to me.

It was up to me to be brave enough to hear those words and take them, let them transform me, let them move me into new life.

Even in the midst of death, literal or figurative, the transforming power of grace can help us embrace new life.

Let me say it again – some of the most powerful moments of grace and healing are those that occur within the waiting of liminal space and time – helping us awaken to what we need to see, telling us what we need to hear, and giving us the courage to do what needs to be done.

So, my friends. As you move through this transition in our Nation, as you move into the season of Lent and waiting for Spring to arrive, as you move through whatever liminal spaces you may be in today or tomorrow, keep your eyes open. Listen. Be brave.

Don't rush the waiting. The moments you spend in the waiting may have much to offer.

But! Do not think I am advising you to be passive or complacent. In the waiting we are not idle!

We *cannot* be idle. The gifts we may find within these liminal spaces are much more abundant

when we use this time wisely. As I said earlier, it matters how we choose to encounter

transition. In the waiting we have important work to do. We must reflect, remember, recover

*who we are* and *who we are not*. In the waiting we are given time to confess and repent, to

forgive and heal, to gather our strength and courage for all that is yet to come. In the waiting we

prepare and plan, queue up resources, hone our skills, negotiate connections and do everything –

*everything* – we can to ensure continued work and the eventual (hopefully?) success of an outcome we cannot imagine and will never see.

One last thing.

I just want to remind you that you are not alone as you lay in the hammock, caught between the mesh of rope and the net of stars, suspended.

As Rilke said, “You must believe that something is happening within you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall.”