

Transition Theory and Liminality

Christians use vivid language to describe the depths of the pascal mystery which forms our faith.

Romans 6:3-4 It is Jesus himself who calls us through baptism to share in his death and new life

John 15:2 The spiritual road to maturity will not be easy, disciples will experience pruning that will lead to fruitfulness

1 Peter 1:7 a refining

John 3:6-7 radical conversion

Life in Christ is shaped by the cross and resurrections of Jesus Christ and in the light of this Christians face the major crisis of life with an attitude of ultimate hope and expectancy. This has huge implications for pastoral care for there are rich resources of word and sacrament that may be offered, with appropriate sensitivity, to nourish and sustain pilgrims along the paths of transformation.

In the midst of life it is helpful to recognise that each spiritual turning point necessarily entails a kind of dying – to old securities, old ways of knowing and of being

Every significant change in our lives is accompanied by a psychological and emotional transitions. Some of these transitions are small, others large. And when so much in our world is changing so fast it becomes more important than ever to understand and manage these inner transitions.

It has been a common feature of many conceptual models to describe transition in terms of a threefold movement.

Most of these models can trace their roots back to the finding of Arnold van Gennep. Van Gennep was an anthropologist who published his book *Rites de Passages* in 1906 in Paris. He studied the traditional rites of passage associated with big life changes such as marriage, death, and the shift from childhood into adulthood in traditional societies. He noted that transitions always involve losing and always hold the possibility of gaining and that they also involve experiences and work! He realised that we never go straight from 'State A' to 'State B'. There is always a third, intermediate stage where we have lost our old identity but not yet fully taken on the new one. He called this intermediate phase the 'Liminal Zone', from the Latin word *limen*, which means 'threshold'.

Getting married provides a good example of the three stages.

The Three Stages of Transition

The first stage of transition is called separation. Here we know that change is coming and we begin to come to terms with the idea that we will take on a new identity. In marriage this is the period of *Engagement*.

The second phase is the Transition or liminal zone. This is the *Wedding Ceremony* itself which might last anything from a few minutes to several days, depending on our culture. Here we cross the threshold and officially become 'married'. But although we are now officially 'married', we aren't yet fully married in the way we will be in a few years' time. The wedding ceremony marks a time of uncertainty, of creation — it's the chrysalis stage between the caterpillar and the butterfly. This is the Threshold.

The third stage of transition is called incorporation. Here we create and discover what 'being married' is really going to mean for us: for who we are, the way we behave, and for how the world behaves towards us. This is where the work of becoming truly 'married' really begins. Traditionally this starts with the *Honeymoon*.

The work involves pain and hope; it will involve losing but with a potential for gain. The pastoral task is sharing and interpreting the losses and opening up the possibility of hope.

“Effective personal identity and effective membership of one's community depends on successful negotiation of transitions between roles and within communities” Van Genepp

We've all gone through these three phases of transition many times in our lives. Every time we started a new job, a new school, got a promotion, or moved home we first had to get used to the idea that our old life was ending ('separating' from the way things used to be), then we crossed the 'threshold' into the uncertainty of a new beginning, and finally we worked to 'consolidate' and build the new stage in our life.

When we were confident about our inner transitions then the outer changes in our lives happened smoothly and easily. When were we nervous or uncertain about our inner changes in identity, then the outer changes in our lives became more difficult.

In this time of nearly constant change, these transitions are happening almost constantly — for us or the people around us. So the better we can understand these transitions, the better we will be able to manage them, and the smoother and more successful the changes in our lives will be.

When did you last experience a significant change in your life? Looking back, can you recognise the periods of Separation, Threshold, and Consolidation? Would it be useful for you (or the people around you) to be able to manage this process more smoothly next time?

Losing and Gaining in times of Transition

Today we view major life events as sickness and so we use a medical/casework approach to care. This is good because it makes us aware of the importance of the event and ensures we are on the look out for people who need care. But, the medical approach reinforces life events as sicknesses to be treated or as pain to be removed or healed.

Loss and pain are part of the ordinary process of human growth and development. Life always involves change and loss, it is integral part of being human.

We can only move onto a new stage of life when we have completed the previous one. There is a link between loss and gain.

In situations of loss, take care that healing is not used to avoid suffering ... we may need to live through the pain rather than be healed of it, we use healing to engage with the suffering. Each episode can be seen as a rehearsal for the next, we can use the experience to gain new hope, gather new strength, move towards new possibilities.

If we can learn about developmental loss in childhood e.g. starting school, pet dying when the losses are expected and relatively straightforward, then we are better equipped to deal with more threatening/multiple losses as an adult e.g. leaving home at 21 and we can't find a job or the children fly the nest and the wife runs off with a colleague!

John Bowlby states that "grief is what happens to us when part of our real or imagined world dies"

But, life is a pattern of plateau/crisis/growth and therefore occasions for pastoral growth. E.g. Place still laid for a dead spouse, husband still calls his wife mummy after children leave home, style of hair still stuck in the fashion of our heyday!

Important to be around in times of crisis because our subconscious often pushes through into our conscious. Can cause panic, confusion or even euphoria.

Can be helpful to mark times of crisis from a faith perspective e.g. occasional offices.

