



Covid-19: A Liminal (Transformative) Experience

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Abstract— Applying the threshold concept of liminality to the Covid-19 pandemic, the essay explores the connection between the development of creativity and critical, disruptive life moments. It argues that it is during critical moments of social disruption that humans best adapt to the requirement of changing societal norms by transitioning to thinking and actions that transform the way they relate to each other and the world. The takeaway of the essay is that liminal space and the thinking and actions that unfold within it are a necessary part of the human condition because it prepares us for the inevitable changes and challenges that delineate the human condition.

Keywords— boundary-crossing, liminality, threshold, transformative, neophytes.

I. INTRODUCTION

At the present time the world is to varying degrees crossing a threshold of release from Covid restrictions and guidelines. Critical thinking therefore demands that we reflect on what we have learned about ourselves as we gradually transition to a post-covid world. Before arriving at this threshold towards a quasi-post-pandemic reality, as a global society we created opportunities for growth (i.e., professional, emotional, psychological) to survive the pandemic. How and why? Because it is during life's troublesome phases when life is interrupted, that we are forced to enact a shift or a repositioning in perspective - in the way we think about and relate to the world. During the Covid pandemic we shifted perspective and embraced creative ways to negotiate life. Liminality is therefore the "betwixt and between" condition (Turner: "Betwixt and Between" 1964) of becoming creative and of perceiving the world from new perspectives by crossing conceptual boundaries into other ways of being and thinking.

II. LIMINALITY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF LIFE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

But how does "living in liminality" relate to our practices for the past two years? Firstly, liminality denotes a temporary space (limen), an in-between state of living that is between what the world was before the pandemic and

what it might become after, whether this may be real or imaginative. Secondly, the liminal space is typically a threshold (or portal if you will) that allows a transition to another way of thinking. Manifesting itself in the modality of an unstoppable social phenomenon that had to be confronted in innovative ways to survive as opposed to something that had to be avoided or quickly defeated, Covid forced upon us an in-between situation and a transformative imperative at the same time: to create within the space of in-betweenness coping strategies meant to make the best out of a critical situation with no apparent end, thus transforming the traditional ways we related to one another pre-pandemically. According to Victor Turner, the limen is a space of pure possibility, "a threshold phase and condition [...] of lived experience in "which none of the rules and few of the experiences of [...] previous existence have prepared" us. (Turner: 1992: 29) As a threshold event, Covid-19 interrupted the normal rhythms of life and introduced us to the possibility of change, an inevitable part of the human condition.

There are three phases of liminality: (1) Separation/break from the familiar world, (2) reconstructive limen of reflection and possibility, and (3) reaggregation into the world with new insights. Since we have already experienced the trauma of separation from normal life at the onset of the Covid pandemic (March 2020), the focus

here will be on the (2) *reconstructive-re-constitutive* and (3) *reaggregation* phases: how we negotiated life creatively within the limen of Covid and some insights (lessons) we appreciate as we come out of it.

In the *re-constitutive* phase of the Covid-19 pandemic we underwent changes in our thinking and practices that symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner would describe as a “transformative process” typical of the way a neophyte in tribal society would reimagine/reconstitute the narrative of his/her life during rites of passage: “Undoing, dissolution, decomposition are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns” (Turner: 1964). We too became ‘neophytes’ forging new ways to survive and to live in terms of undoing old ways of doing things into new ones. Life did unravel in a sense, but in this undoing, a new way of doing things surfaced. This transformative characteristic of liminal concepts is developed within a “realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise.” (Turner: 1964) During the pandemic social agents (we the people) went beyond our conventional conceptual boundaries and embraced a fresh way to look at the world. People began to respond creatively to an interstitial (in-between) phase of constantly changing and challenging rules brought about by pandemic life. The limen created by the pandemic restricted our movements from one physical space to another and prevented close social contact, but it also led us to cross cognitive boundaries to discover new ways to do old things. The limen became a space for learning, adapting to and relating to a never-before-experienced world situation. Accordingly, during the reconstructive phase of the pandemic people demonstrated resilience and innovation in the way they conducted their professional duties.

In what follows I would like to focus on some novel practices that delineated the delivery of pedagogical curriculum within the education system. I understand my analysis does not account for the countless of people who lost their jobs during the pandemic and were not fortunate enough to cross conceptual boundaries to novel innovations permitted to other professions. I do believe, however that everyone at some point engaged in some reconfiguration of old habits and learned something about themselves during this liminal period. The liminal journey is all about learning.

In education, teachers crossed the boundary from actual classrooms to the virtual classrooms of their computers in their homes, i.e., from teaching concepts grounded in classroom pedagogy to concepts tailored to virtual teaching. Subjects were taught virtually, and through collectively focused reflection with colleagues on teaching

strategy to promote student’s well-being, teachers interacted (as much as possible) with their students’ emotional and intellectual needs in a variety of ways. One innovative way that education was made more engaging during the creative phase of liminal living was the crossing over to the virtual realm of online breakout rooms. Teachers learned to access and create technological/virtual platforms and spaces (i.e., breakout rooms) where students across grade levels were equally crossing conceptual boundaries to engage in online collaborative learning. Therefore, breakout rooms were a boundary-crossing teaching strategy developed within the reconstructive phase of liminal experience to make up for the lack of face-to-face interaction within a classroom setting. The crossing over from in-class teaching-learning space to online virtual space (where students and teachers collectively simulate face-to-face direct instruction) is a liminal type of pedagogical interaction insofar as the ‘on-line breakout room’ is a virtual-spatial reconfiguration of direct and in-class teaching practices within the online virtual space of an electronic world created by computer software.

Innovation during the pandemic was not limited to the domain of education, however. In other areas of professional life beyond the classroom, the pandemic also required a crossover from actual to virtual spaces. Most professionals in the corporate-business world whose jobs permitted working from home performed the requirements of their jobs within a liminal space where work is experienced vicariously - online one is concurrently present (virtually) yet non-present (physically). In short, during the pandemic employees working from home accessed computers and crossed virtual boundaries to enter other layers of virtual spaces to engage indirectly with colleagues on many fronts: professionally, pedagogically, personally, etc. Therefore, working in a liminal configuration during the pandemic required that most people transitioned from physical to virtual domains/spaces that made them more resilient and creative. It forced people to acknowledge (and adapt to) the temporary liminality of life and move through the spaces that were by necessity created to survive in it. Whether consciously or subconsciously aware, during the pandemic we were becoming more determined to live life differently with respect to how we lived it before, and this was a transformative moment. This is the essence of liminal learning: to come up with new ways to exist and move through the various spaces of place and mind and discover things about oneself that were not known or considered before.

III. CONCLUSION

As a final consideration of the way critical events bring about transformative potential (liminality), a word must be said about adaptability and creativity in critical life moments. The examples of transference (or crossover) from physical to virtual spaces mentioned above testify to the fact that, whenever human adaptability and innovation are geared towards making the best out of a bad situation, we became the co-creators of new modalities of social and professional interaction as we negotiate life in whatever crisis is at hand, even a world-wide pandemic. These creative practices during the pandemic are linked by one fundamental point: We took advantage of the possibilities offered by a crisis phase in life within the space of the limen, a place where novel forms of thinking and praxis take form for the purpose of survival. To survive, we had to perceive Covid not as something that must be denied or crushed but as something that must be negotiated as a critical moment that offers an opportunity to learn to do things differently, to transform our way of thinking and doing things. Crisis moments offer opportunities for alternative social interactions for they require that we step up and get things done even if this entails a radically unprecedented way. The institutional and relational interruptions and setbacks we witnessed during the pandemic shutdown were shared and felt by all. In this phase of uncertainty, the novel forms of relating to one another that we created to negotiate the pandemic demonstrated the best of humanity – our empathy towards one another. Through this empathy we offset the negative psychology of social restrictions by co-creating novel ways to interact with others, what is referred to as “different meeting points with otherness.” (Stavrides 2019: 5)

These examples make clear the fact that during the intervening *reconstructive-reconstitutive* stage of liminal living in the pandemic we continued to develop creativity, resilience, and empathy. And as we have now entered the *reaggregation* phase of liminality characterized by a worldwide easing and even ending of pandemic restrictions, we must take comfort in the insights we ought to have learned: The fact that those who survived the pandemic also survived its psychological impact by taking advantage of the conceptual possibilities offered by the limen of covid and turned life around by sheer determination. If we all took some time to linger in our own (as well as others’) thresholds, if on occasion we purposely interrupted our daily rhythms and patterns and repositioned our perspective to include the “other” human being next to us, the conceptual crossover to the next stage would reveal a more empathetic world.

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