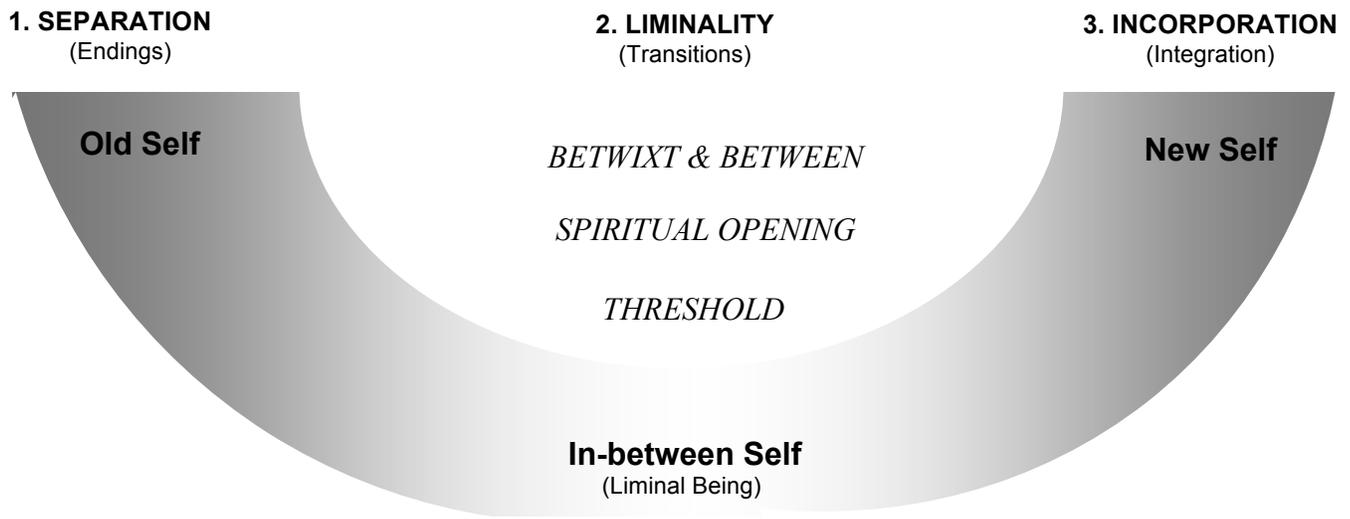


Understanding Change Through the Rites Of Passages Framework

By Gisela Wendling, PhD. 2008



Rites of Passage

The three-phased rites of passage framework represents an archetypal pattern of change. Arnold Van Gennep (1909/1960), a French folklorist, first developed this framework to capture how traditional people experienced change. He asserted that every change of place, state (social structures, seasonal changes), social position and age is a rite of passage. He came to believe that the energy found in any social system needs to be renewed at crucial intervals and that this renewal is accomplished in different social settings through rites of passages. These rites protect and free a social system from undue duress and disturbance in order to foster change at both an individual and collective level.

Separation

The rite of passages process usually begins with something that has come to an end in our lives. This end may be a positive change, such as accepting a new job or marriage, or something that may be difficult, such as losing a parent. An ending may also be something less dramatic such as a completed work project. But endings, even those we seek, often bring about feelings of loss. The term separation indicates that there is something we are separating from, something that is either outside of ourselves or something that defines who we are.

Liminality—*BETWIXT & BETWEEN; THRESHOLD*

After the separation there is a time of transition. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, 1977, 1987) referred to this phase as the liminal phase. Liminality stems from the Latin word ‘limen,’ meaning *threshold* or *doorway*. It can also mean *margin*.

Liminality is the place of in-betweenness, of no longer belonging to the old and not yet of the new. Liminality is also the place of ambiguity and uncertainty, of anxiety and hope, as we are suspended in the betwixt and between. Questions may come up about our sense of belonging, identity, social relationships, vocation, and even our purpose. Depending on the nature of change, this transitional phase may be short lived or can extend over time. According to Turner, the person (liminal being) crossing the threshold comes in contact with divine elements and gains sacred knowledge that is both informative and potentially transformative.

Being in the liminal phase often creates a sense of vulnerability; however, it is this opening that is necessary if more fundamental change is to occur. Changes are set in motion as we let go of what no longer is useful to us, and our old self /state, and grieve what is lost in the process. It is helpful at such a time to affirm what will stay the same in the other areas of our lives. Letting go is essential if something new is to emerge along with the resulting sense of creativity, possibility, renewal and vitality. In the end, what is gained from the rite of passage process may be quite different than what was initially expected.

Incorporation

The last phase of the rites of passage process is about consolidation of the lessons learned and the changes made. We begin to apply these new developments and insights to how we will now live our lives. This process of integration often is marked by challenges such as the past catching up with us to reassert its old patterns and the seduction of the status quo. For example, those around us may continue to see us as who we were and may not want us to change. Fortunately, there is an inherent motivation within us to grow and to move toward our potential. The rites of passage model provides clues on the resources we, individually and collectively, can line up to enhance our motivation and support this movement.

Old Self — In-Between Self — New Self

Significant changes in our lives can produce experiences that transform who we are — especially when the rites of passage is consciously engaged. What has been your experience of this journey?

Traditional Rites

The rites of passage framework originally captured how traditional communities experienced and supported change on an individual and collective level using a diversity of ritual practices. Intact indigenous communities continue with these practices today (e.g., seasonal rites, initiations, certain healing ceremonies, birth and death rituals) as a way to actively engage its members in all phases of the transition process. Rather than perfunctory ceremonies, these rituals draw on and coalesce the transformative energies originating from multiple sources: the developmental, psychological, social and spiritual drives for change as well as those inherent in the natural environment and spiritual worlds.

Typically one or more ritual leaders are responsible to guide these rites and hold the space for the journeys of those involved. These communities understand that these rites are transformative in nature. Usually the ritual participant separates from the community to undergo the rite. Certain rites require that the initiate undergo the rite alone, although usually with the support of a guide. Other times whole groups experience the rite together. Once the rite is successfully completed the community welcomes the initiates back, but not as who they were but as who they have become.

Liminality in Traditional Rites

The liminal phase in traditional rites of passage is typically a temporary experience. Some individuals literally experience the liminal phase as crossing a threshold. For those experiencing protracted rites, the threshold turns into a 'corridor' or very long 'tunnel' which they need to pass through to attain the necessary insight from these rites before returning to the community.

Under very special circumstances this liminal phase can turn into a way of life or permanent liminality, especially for those committed to a strict spiritual practice. These individuals may be monks, anchorites, priests, shamans or mystics. What sets these people apart from ordinary individuals is that they are in continuous contact with the spiritual domain and live their lives in between the ordinary world and spirit world. Because of their special status, these individuals live on the margins of their community and they do not engage in social life of the community in ways most of its members do.

Notes

Liminality in a Time of Continuous Change

Several dynamics become visible in applying the rites of passage framework to our contemporary lives marked by ongoing and often discontinuous change.

- In our western culture we generally lack meaningful rites to support the multifaceted and often overwhelming transitions we are in. A growing number of individuals are turning to the indigenous traditions to learn their ritual practices and to apply them to their own lives.
- Many of us tend to be more open to psychological perspectives than spiritual approaches associated with change. However, connecting with a spiritual source for insight is essential to activate the deeper powers of a rite of passage.
- We often experience additional challenges when understanding and navigating change as a result of our increasingly global and interconnected world and the multitude of cultural practices we encounter.
- As such, we often experience change across multiple levels of human systems simultaneously (e.g., personal, interpersonal, family, group, organization, community, global society and even the ecosphere). The more we are aware of and enmeshed in change across these levels, the more we tend to experience the betwixt and between dynamics of liminality.
- There are a number of ways in which people can be in relationship to the variety of liminal experience they have in their lives. They can be experienced as challenging and limiting or as generative and creative. We can fluidly move through liminal phases, experience them as crises, or simply feel in a limbo in this aspect of our life.
- How can the rites of passage framework help us support us in better understanding, more fully engage in, and complete the complex experiences of change that define our lives?

“Human life is not possible and worth living without some degree of stability, meaning and sense of home. Liminality is indeed a source of renewal, a restoration of meaning and the pouring of fresh wine into an old bottle. But if there are no proper “bottles”, the fermenting power is diluted and lost. If everything is constantly changing, then things always remain the same. Liminality is a source of excitement and variety and a shakeup from the dull routine of everyday life, but nothing is more boring than the permanent state of liminality, where even the hope of escaping the routine is lost. Individuals are forced to invent more and more sophisticated and ultimately perverse forms of entertainment in a mad search after experience, in the wish to surpass in excitement the boredom of the hectic existence in a permanent state of liminality.”

Arpad Szokolczai (2000, p 226)

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