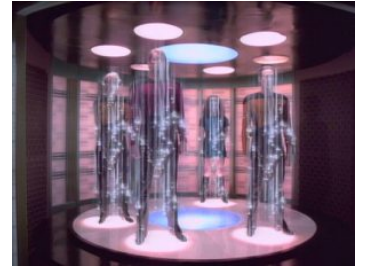


Liminality and the Enterprise



We Christians use some weird words. Sometimes we make them up, sometimes we borrow them. Often they are shibboleths that stamp us into a box. You know what I mean: If I use the word “anointed” a lot you can guess my churchmanship. Similarly if I emphasise words like “biblical” or “exegetical” or “missional” or “priestly” or “liturgical” etc. etc.

With some light-hearted light-cynicism, then, I’m well aware the word “liminal” might conjure up some stereotyped attachments—an instant imagining of spiritual faces of profound empathy glowing with a maternal understanding of some unspeakable shared understanding. Some of my friends love the word. It causes others to roll their eyes.

For what it’s worth, I like it.

From the Oxford Dictionary:

liminal (/'lɪmɪn(ə)l/) *adjective*

1. *Relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process.*
2. *Occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold.*

Late 19th century: from Latin limen, limin- ‘threshold’ + -al.

“Liminal” means being in-between, an existence that straddles a then-now-not-yet situation. An anthropological application applies it, say, to a child experiencing a rite of passage: In

the midst of that rite, the person is an in-between no-longer-child and not-yet-adult. They pass through liminality, and while transitory, it is real, necessary, and often involves pain, grief, and letting-go.

Now before eyes start rolling, think it through. This is real human experience we're talking about. We all experience transitions: new jobs, new relationships (what is "engagement" if not a confrontingly liminal time?), and shifts in our stage of life and responsibilities. These shifts can be perplexing, painful, rug-pullingly awkward.

They can be done well, and result in significant maturation.

Or they can be done badly, which usually results in someone being two-people-at-once—an impossible task which results in a double-minded lack of integrity, even if it's subtle. We all know the grown man who has failed to transition from being the lost boy of a dominant or absent father. We usually see in it ourselves, or those we're close to.

Books, many books, have been written about this stuff. I won't go into it. But I do want to mention the image that got me thinking these thoughts: ***Star Trek***.

Bear with me, I am a geek.

More specifically, it's about the Star Trek transporter system by which people are "beamed" from one place to another, with twinkling stars and similar sound effects. It's a wonderful *deus ex machina* plot device and not something you think about too much. But the implications *are* explored from time to time: I was watching a TNG episode in which a character baulks at using the device. She doesn't want to be converted into energy, bounced through outer space, and rematerialised. It's a thought picked up on by youtubist CGP Grey who points out that a teleporter is basically a device that kills you in one place and reassembles you in another. Shudder.

But perhaps that's the power of the analogy I'm attempting

here. In a liminal moment you're both dead and alive, killed and not yet re-born. While the beaming is happening: you're still you, but not solid, amorphous, transitory. In fact, in Star Trek world, during transport you can *change*: bio filters can be applied, diseases and DNA flaws can be eliminated, or things can go horribly wrong.

Things can happen to you, and with you, in that liminal unformed stage. But you can't get from there to here or here to there without passing through it. Liminality is the necessary point of crisis, the necessary volatility of change.

Perhaps, then, the best attitude with which to approach our liminal crises is one that boldly goes—not with fear but with the positive imperative: “Energise!”

The Dirt of Deeper Change

I remember a time when Gill and I moved into a new home. It had a backyard! With my farmboy zeal I got stuck into turning the *yard* into a *garden*. Some things were already in place – mature fruit trees, a tap for the hose. Some things had to go



– obvious things like weeds and rubbish and rusty forgotten tools, but also some healthy plants and shrubs that were simply in the wrong place; they had had their time and now their fruit was waning, their shade was blocking the sun, and their suckers were running amok. After a hard days labour with all manner of tools and a lot of sweat, digging and hoeing and raking, I proudly revealed the outcome to my young

wife.

She was not impressed. “Well done,” she said with a subtle friendly hint of mockery, “you’ve made some... dirt!”

We had discussed the grand plan, of course – how we could have new fruit trees and a veggie patch. But some of the in-between steps were unclear to her, and also to me. I couldn’t have predicted that a pipe was in the way of where I had plans for a plum tree. Some new beds needed borders, and we’d simply run out of money to line them with something nice; rough outlines from pruned branches would do for now. And of course, I’d been delayed in starting; the season was getting on and some of what we hoped to plant would need to wait for next year.

The lush garden was going to happen! It would grow in its own good time. It would shift and develop as new ideas came along. It would become something like what we had thought it would be, and a whole lot different as well.

But, for now, I had just made dirt.

The metaphor in all this, I hope, is obvious. There are ways of leading organisations (and my experience is with churches) which are akin to *maintaining* a garden. They are effective and necessary: rotating crops, mowing lawns, pruning in season, timing the harvest, and even making improvements and modifications.

But deeper changes are changes of *identity*; they shift things, they are akin to **making a yard into a garden**.

These changes tackle the deeper questions of who we actually are, and the essence and application of our mission and calling. On the ground it often comes with a sense of *stagnancy* (“everything is always the same”) or of *urgency* (“we’re not doing what we need to be doing, we’re wasting ourselves”). This leads us to re-examining the old, both

embracing and letting go of the things we've inherited. It leads us to dreaming some dreams about what might be, even as we realise that it might not turn out exactly as planned. It allows significant change.

And early on in the process, it can often look like all we do is just make dirt.

Leadership at this point can seem fraught and complex. It requires *assertion* because some things must be done away with. It requires *courage*, because some of the "systems" of the organisation will begin to fail or fall as they no longer have their normal referents. It requires *vision*, because what is imagined must be first and foremost. The temptation is to retreat from the plan: to patch things up by making adjustments to a rota, or tweaking a job description. But this will not be enough, the leader must show the way to "go into the soil and die" in order to live again.

At this point, a leader may feel that everything is collapsing around them. And they will need to grieve and mourn along with everyone else. Because things are less predictable, they will often have to do a lot *themselves*, or with a close core team who can hold to the sense of identity and call that has motivated the change in the first place. Others, who knew what to do the way things were, may feel idle or unwanted.

They will need to be encouraged to have a well-earned fallow season, and to then find the place where they flourish in the new.

Slowly, as green shoots appear – in God's timing not ours – the time of dirt fades away. Amorphous plans begin to take a shape in reality. And the systems for maintaining and *enjoying* the new thing will come more easily.

But you can't go directly there.

Sometimes, it looks like you've sweated hard, and worked yourself to the bone, just to make dirt.

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