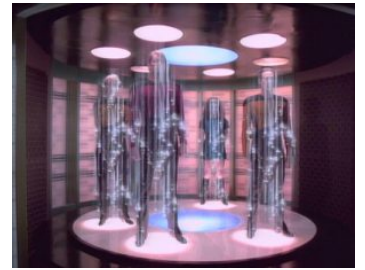


Liminality and the Enterprise



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 balks 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!"