

June 2021

## Betwixt and Between: Liminality in Teachers' Lives and in the Pandemic

Sunshine R. Sullivan

*Houghton College*, [sunshine.sullivan@houghton.edu](mailto:sunshine.sullivan@houghton.edu)

Ken Badley

*Tyndale University*, [kbadley1@gmail.com](mailto:kbadley1@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/icctej>



Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sullivan, S. R., & Badley, K. (2021). Betwixt and Between: Liminality in Teachers' Lives and in the Pandemic. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

---

## Betwixt and Between: Liminality in Teachers' Lives and in the Pandemic

### Abstract

The pandemic has altered the ways educators carry out their work, having forced them to switch *en masse* in March, 2020 to online instruction and then to various combinations of online and hybrid instruction. Along with educational policy-makers, classroom educators and school leaders wonder when education will return to normal and the degree to which educational normal will look like it did prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. Educating during a pandemic fits the anthropological concept of liminality, of being between two states (introduced by van Gennep in 1909). After noting the origins and meaning of the concept of a *liminal time* or *liminality* and some Biblical examples of liminality, the article reviews three specific liminal times and spaces in educators' careers: the tension some educators experience between church and academy, career transitions, and the transition from face-to-face instruction to online learning. The authors offer strategies educators can use to support their passage through each of those three liminal times and spaces.

### Keywords

liminality, Covid-19, pandemic, education, teachers, teacher identity

## Betwixt and Between: Liminality in Teachers' Lives and in the Pandemic

*Sunshine R. Sullivan, Houghton College*

*Ken Badley, Tyndale University*

---

All people, including educators, find themselves in times of transition between one stage and the next or one status and the next, what some call times between, or liminal times. Many people, including educators have experienced the Covid-19 pandemic as such a time (Bell, 2021). In March, 2020, most educators suddenly found themselves teaching in ways markedly different from what they were accustomed to. The widespread assumption that educational work—like the rest of life—would return to normal within a few weeks proved wrong. As a result, at the time of this writing, educators have now completed a full year of switching between various instructional modes as health regulations have shifted and as students or educators themselves have been exposed to Covid. While some predict that educational delivery will never be the same (Duncan et al., 2020; Hill & Jochim, 2020), many educators anticipate that at some point classrooms and instruction will return to normal. Educators want to understand what comes next and how schools might be transformed because of the pandemic. Meanwhile, they want to offer their best during this time. We believe that the concepts of liminality and liminal times offer a window for understanding this time. Furthermore, these concepts offer educators important insights into the ordinary and predictable transitions through which most educators go in the course of their careers.

Cursory reading on liminality will reveal that the term originated in anthropology and, in its first appearance in Arnold van Gennep's (1909, 1960) volume, *Rites of Passage*, specifically referred to times between. The paradigm van Gennep offered was the middle time in a cultural or religious

ritual when the person undergoing the ritual no longer had the status they had known previously (e.g., childhood) but did not yet enjoy the state that the completed ritual would indicate (e.g., adulthood). In the century since van Gennep wrote, and especially in the decades since 1967, when Victor Turner (1967) introduced van Gennep's work to the English-speaking world in his chapter, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage" (Turner, 1967), liminality has taken on several additional meanings but the original sense remains dominant in the English-speaking world. To recognize van Gennep's contribution to our thinking, we use the words liminal and liminality and the phrases liminal times and liminal spaces throughout this essay. Furthermore, to honour Turner, van Gennep's translator, we use *betwixt* as well, as uncommon as that word is in our contemporary lexicon.

One of us recently heard the word liminal used to refer to those moments—in classes, at concerts, in church, anywhere—when those present clearly perceive God's presence. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim (1912) labelled these moments collective effervescence; some now call them God moments. More recently than Durkheim, an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* illustrates our claim that liminality has taken on new meanings. Carnes (2004) described how an undergraduate course came to life when he introduced role-play into the reading of ancient texts. In that article, he reported that classroom liminality was

---

**Sunshine Sullivan** is Associate Professor of Education at Houghton College.

**Ken Badley** is Professor by Special Appointment at Tyndale University

---

characterized by “... uncertainty and emotional intensity, by the inversion of status and social hierarchies, and by imaginative expressiveness” (p. 4). Neither Carnes’ experiences in class nor God moments matches what van Gennep meant by liminality a century ago. But the word keeps acquiring new meanings, possibly in part because of its simple phonological beauty (from the Latin word for threshold). In addition, we believe its relatively recent arrival in English and somewhat exotic origins give it a kind of appeal. Our task here is not to wind back the linguistic clock or protest the semantic additions to van Gennep’s original concept. Rather, we will argue that van Gennep’s concept of liminality can help both pre- and in-service educators understand more clearly some of the transitions educators undergo. In our conclusion, we will return briefly to the newer sense of the term, asking whether the Covid-19 pandemic can become what many call in vernacular English, a moment, and what some call God moments. We also suggest in our conclusion that the pandemic experience, like other threshold and transitional periods in Christian educators’ lives, can become times when educators sense God’s presence in unusual ways. In short, we believe that both van Gennep’s original sense and the contemporary sense—with accretions—can yield insights for educators.

## The Concept of Liminality

When van Gennep introduced the concept of liminality in 1909, he referred specifically to the time between one stage or status and another. He drew his own examples from the cultural rites by which early adolescents signified the move—and thereby moved—to adulthood. The Masai boy-child leaves his village for a week alone and, having killed a lion, returns a young man. Van Gennep assigned the term liminal to the somewhat undefined period in the middle of that week, noting the difficulties of identifying the precise moment of transition to adulthood. That is, a boy left his village at the start of the week but a man returned. Van Gennep’s argument is that we cannot identify the exact moment of transition; the entire week is a time of transition or liminal time. To illustrate the original sense of the concept here, we turn to Scripture, where liminality can be discerned through several people’s lived

experiences. We can see it clearly illuminated in the stories of Jacob (Genesis 28:10-17), Mary (Luke 1:26-34), Jesus (Matthew 26: 36-46), and Paul (Acts 9:1-19). In each case, these people found themselves in spaces and places between one status and another. In the final major section of this article, we ask how educators in liminal times and spaces—especially during a pandemic—can hear God’s voice more clearly. In anticipation of that later focus, we will examine these biblical stories not only as illustrations of van Gennep’s concept, but as places where we might understand how to see God’s leading more clearly.

In his 1967 explanation of van Gennep’s concept of liminality, Victor Turner offered a list of what he called the structural properties of liminal periods. His list offers some substantive insights into the liminal periods in teachers’ lives.

- a time of instruction
- rites of passage
- a recognized step in one’s maturation
- a definite transition between two relatively stable and recognizably different states or statuses
- separate stages: separation, margin, aggregation. (Turner, 1967, pp. 93-94)

For van Gennep, separation implies that the individual detach from a group, a relatively fixed structure, or a relatively stable state. Turner is careful to note that this separation may be either symbolic or actual. Detachment introduces a level of ambiguity to the life of the transitioning individual, whom Turner calls the passenger. The liminal state lacks the characteristics of both the previous and anticipated contexts. Once the passenger’s passage is complete, the ambiguity is reduced or disappears as the passenger embraces the roles and obligations of the new context or status.

We note immediately the possible connection of liminality to life during the Covid-19 pandemic. Among the common phrases one hears at the time of writing (March, 2021) are these two: “Can you hear me?” and “When this is over ...” The first, a question, one hears in a significant percentage of online meetings. Although the ambiguity it represents is not precisely what van Gennep had

in mind, it speaks to the uncertainty we all experience at the start of a Zoom or Skype call. In many cases this question serves as an emblem of the larger ambiguity many educators experienced when they began teaching online in the spring of 2020 (perhaps for the first time in their lives). The second comment, “when this is over,” usually begins sentences such as “I will never complain about the logistics of field trips again” or “I am going to get back on an airplane.” If there is doubt that the first example we offered connects to van Gennepe’s original sense of the word liminal, there is no doubt that the second connects. We are definitely in a time between. However, unlike the early adolescent in van Gennepe’s paradigm example, we do not know when this transition away from pandemic conditions will end.

---

*But we do not know when this will be over. Will it be when we ourselves are vaccinated? When 70% or 80% are vaccinated? When hospitalizations drop to this or that level per 100,000 people in our nation, state, or province?*

---

That is, our ambiguity may be deeper than that of the early adolescent in van Gennepe’s picture inasmuch as that adolescent could at least count off the required seven days. Many educators can name the actual day they moved from pre-pandemic, stable, face-to-face teaching to lockdown and online teaching. But we do not know when this will be over. Will it be when we ourselves are vaccinated? When 70% or 80% are vaccinated? When hospitalizations drop to this or that level per 100,000 people in our nation, state, or province? We have become used to hearing reports that this or that university has just announced they will continue in online mode for the fall, 2020 term, then the January, 2021 term, then the spring and summer term of 2021, or perhaps already for the fall, 2021 term. In short, we wait to hear because we don’t know. We live and educate in an unstable, liminal time, a time

between what some call normal or the old normal and whatever normal will look when this is over.

---

*In short, we wait to hear because we don’t know. We live and educate in an unstable, liminal time, a time between what some call normal or the old normal and whatever normal will look when this is over.*

---

### **Biblical Examples of Liminality**

Illustrations of liminality can be drawn from many sources, anthropology perhaps being the most obvious because that is where the concept originated. We will illustrate the concept from some familiar Biblical stories. We begin with Jacob’s story and experiences with liminality as an example for how we can begin to discern God’s presence in our own experiences as educators experiencing liminality. While fleeing his family, Jacob dreams that angels are ascending and descending a stairway that reaches to heaven (Genesis 28:10-17). Several features of this narrative warrant our attention. First, we note Jacob’s ambiguous status in his own family. He had positioned himself between his mother and father, lied to his father, and robbed his brother. His self-induced internal exile led to his flight from Beersheba to Haran. While he was traveling, it grew dark, he slept, and he dreamed. He dreamed in the wild ... he was literally be-wild-ered. For Jacob, the wilderness is an in-between space where God speaks to him in a dream, a dream that awakens him to God’s everlasting presence. Caught in this familial uncertainty and sleeping rough like a Masai youth, he dreamt of a stairway to heaven where God remained at the top while angels walked up and down. One can read this dream in many different ways. With reference to liminality, we read it this way: Jacob dreams and God speaks. The dream communicates to Jacob that God is and always will be with him, even in a time between. The angels descending and ascending mean that God fills the space that Jacob occupies and makes this space a place for Jacob. “When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought,

'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.' He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (NRSV). The in-between space allowed Jacob to perceive God's persistent presence, and he responds by naming the wilderness a holy place.

Having left Egypt but not yet having occupied their new land, the people of Israel spent four decades betwixt and between ... wandering in the wilderness. Arguably, Mary experienced liminality at the Annunciation; she was deeply perplexed by the angel Gabriel's announcement that she, a virgin engaged to a humble carpenter, would give birth to the Son of the Most High (Luke 1: 26-34). What was Mary between here? She was between the world she knew—the world that made religious and reproductive sense—and a world that did not make religious or reproductive sense. She was between the common-sense world of the working people of Nazareth and the world of those who occupy thrones. Next time you hear her response read aloud during Advent, listen for her sense that she has found herself in a liminal space. Her next task was to wait, fitting perfectly van Gennepe's original paradigm; at what point would she no longer be a young woman from Nazareth and become the Mother of God (to use Roman Catholic language for a moment)? At conception? At the birth of Jesus? When Jesus began his ministry? She lived in a liminal time.

Jesus himself illustrates van Gennepe's idea as well. Before being taken captive, Jesus spent time in prayer and reflection in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-46). His earthly ministry was ending and he now faced his own death ... a between time. Some readers also have him uncertain about his own vocation ... should he or is he able to go through what he knows will be a gruesome end to his earthly life? We make no pretense here to being Biblical scholars but we wonder if Jesus's repeated claim that his time had not yet come (John 2:4, John 7:6) illustrates liminality inasmuch as it reveals his own sense of living in a space between heaven and earth.

Prior to becoming the Apostle Paul, Saul the Zealot was blind for three days and had to wait to find out what was next (Acts 9:1-19). As did Mary's

time of waiting, these three days fit perfectly what van Gennepe described in his Rites of Passage.

Having briefly reviewed stories of liminal times in the lives of Jacob, Mary, and Jesus, and noted briefly that the children of Israel and Paul also experienced times between, we want to note one final—very general—example of betwixt and between, one that all Christians experience, this example from the whole sweep of Scripture. The Christian Scriptures and Christian theology picture all who name Christ living in a time between the Fall and the Eschaton. We live in a world affected by sin but we wait for the full realization of Christ's Reign at some future time. Meanwhile, as writers such as Flannery O'Connor and T. S. Eliot have reminded us, this world is full of God's grace, "charged with God's grandeur" (Hopkins, 1985). We know theologically and we know from our own day-to-day experience that we live in a time and space between. We wait. And, waiting, we live in what van Gennepe called a liminal space.

### **Liminality in Educators' Lives**

Having introduced van Gennepe's concept and illustrated it from Scripture, we turn now to the liminal moments in educators' work and lives. Without wanting to minimize the significance of, say, an adolescent boy living alone in the wild for a week to make his transition into adulthood, we do want to note that few transitions in educators' lives take only a week. For example, many school districts set a due date several months before the end of the academic year for teachers to submit requests for a new position or a new school. Those submitting such requests may not hear the results of their application until near the end of the school year or, in some cases, just before school goes back into session. Some universities require that sabbatical proposals and promotion/tenure portfolios be submitted early in the first term of the previous academic year, but affected professors may not hear the final result of their application until after a board meeting held as many as six or seven months later. Neither of us envies the fears, isolation, and likely hunger of the boy of 13 who must survive alone for days in the wild, but we do envy the relative brevity of his waiting period.

## Liminality and Ambiguity

We noted above that van Gennep and Turner argued that a kind of ambiguity characterizes these liminal periods, compared to the stability that typically precedes the liminal time. Both wrote more narrowly (about rites of passage) than we are writing here, but they nevertheless identified correctly a characteristic of such periods of transition in educators' lives. Should the school teacher pack up her room or not? Will he ever teach this unit again? If the promotion-tenure committee denies my application, should I apply for a post at a different university? How much energy should I put into teaching while I wait to hear if I will have a post here next year? Political leaders prohibited constitutionally from running for another term in office still enjoy a kind of clarity in their final months in office, the title lame-duck notwithstanding. And young adolescents undergoing culturally-prescribed rituals to become adults also know that in a few days—which can be counted—the hunger and isolation will end. But many educators in transition are denied such clarity. Searching several educational databases reveals the long-documented slide in teaching effectiveness as (many) educators cruise toward retirement (Holley, 1977; Shaw & Lazear, 2008). But a similar search reveals a paucity of research on educators' effectiveness while they await employment decisions. We know intuitively that the educator in a waiting period gives energy to wondering and worrying, energy that might be directed in more positive and productive ways. But that research awaits.

Another example relates to pre-service teachers. Graduates of education programs receive their degrees and the administrators of their programs submit lists of qualifying names to the Teacher Certification Branch of the Department of Education in their respective states and provinces. But the graduates then wait weeks to receive their teaching licenses or certificates. To them, it finally feels real—or it feels most real—when they finally receive their first teaching certificate or license in the mail. The liminal period between meeting the last graduation requirement, or graduation weekend, and the receipt of the license can run weeks or even months. Similarly, the applicant for a new teaching post may not hear from the board

for months (and may hear the next day or even be hired on the spot). The faculty member has submitted the tenure or promotion portfolio

---

*We believe that two questions arise in these moments. Can the one waiting grow during this liminal time? Can the one waiting experience this liminal time as a thin place, a place to encounter God or sense God's presence?*

---

but the committee will not report back for another two months. Imminent retirees have made plans but cannot yet know what life will look like after packing up their last box and turning in their office keys. And, at the time of writing, millions of teachers worldwide wonder when they will return to face-to-face teaching, or when their classrooms will operate at capacity again, or when they will be permitted to teach without wearing a mask. All of these waiting periods, including the current one in which we have all found ourselves, fit perfectly van Gennep's original understanding of liminal time: no longer this but not yet that. We believe that two questions arise in these moments. Can the one waiting grow during this liminal time? Can the one waiting experience this liminal time as a thin place, a place to encounter God or sense God's presence?

We believe that in educators' busy lives, liminal moments and thin spaces can easily be ignored and their importance overlooked. Yet, these moments and spaces can bring restoration if we reframe them in ways that allow us to stop and reflect on and within them. We have identified three such spaces: between church and academy, between the successive periods of our educational vocations, and between physical and digital learning contexts.

## Between church and academy

Christian educators and academics are sometimes caught between church and academy; we sometimes are suspected or even delegitimized by both sides because of our association with the

other. Christians in education—and likely in many fields of endeavor—experience this kind of double jeopardy. In its strongest versions, such delegitimation may actually take the form of religious discrimination. George Yancey (2011), for example, has traced the bias against Christians in faculty recruitment to sociology departments. On Yancey's telling, Christian academics are literally caught between their faith and their need for employment. Just as our faith may cause our colleagues to resist our academic offerings, our academic vocation may also cause our church community to resist what we offer through and for our faith practices. Enduring criticism at church, for over-thinking congregational decisions and asking too many questions, can often be part of life for the Christian academic. Our faith and our vocation are not easily separated dimensions of our identity. So when we experience suspicion or marginalization in either of these spaces (church and academy), attributed to our membership in the other space, we find ourselves traveling through or residing in liminal spaces; we become the passengers in van Gennep's framework.

Exploring and developing rituals that will help us find strength and joy in our multidimensional identities is vital for this work in the liminal space between the church and the academy. However, educators in this liminal space, must first recognize it as such, what Rundle (2015) called acknowledgement. Finding ways to discern that they are responding effectively to God's call on their work life requires intentional time and space. We offer two strategies that we have taken up in various ways for our own vocational discernment. First, we recommend journaling of some kind (e.g., visual, gratitude, intuition, musical, unsent letters) as a means of reflecting intentionally on the liminal time or space in which one finds oneself. Reading and dialoguing with one's past journals can also be a source of discernment in our following of God's voice. Second, we recommend intentionally attending to and cultivating a community of practice with whom you can walk beside through various liminal experiences. While there are many types of communities of practice, we benefit from one that is intentionally designed to support us and other members to regularly share both the details of our

work (how it's going) and our sense that our work is our vocation (how it's feeling).

While people do not ordinarily go looking for liminal spaces, those spaces have a way of finding people, offering opportunities to be awakened, as Jacob was awakened, to God's everlasting presence and to our complicated, but critical roles as Christian educators and academics. As Jacob discovered, liminality can be difficult. We believe that educators who take the steps such as those we noted above can flourish during liminal times.

### **Career transitions as liminal spaces**

A second kind of liminal space relates to educators' transitions throughout their careers. Such transitions are not limited to in-service teachers. One of us recently saw the discussion in an educational foundations course shift from the themes in the course text to the frustrations of being education students who have completed a major internship but who now find themselves trapped on campus (their phrase, not ours) for another semester of course-work. The major taste of teaching afforded them in their fall-semester school placements dramatically reduced their vision for any longer sitting in desks in university classes (again, their words, not ours). Post-internship, they felt removed, nearly denied. They were almost teachers, but clearly not quite there. Back on campus and back to coursework, they found themselves in a liminal space, a space between.

Many early- and mid-career educators enter liminal spaces when they wonder about and then begin their next degree. Other mid-career educators go through periods when they lack vocational clarity, experienced by some as a desire to shift from K-12 to higher education, experienced by others as restlessness in their current department, system, school, or college; they want a different post and a new place. Professors await word on grants, paper proposals and publications they have submitted. They await the decisions of committees, department chairs, deans, and provosts regarding promotion and tenure. In any given year, a small minority of educators in both K-12 and higher education settings await the decisions of disciplinary



committees; they wonder if they will have jobs at all after the current academic year ends. And educators facing retirement find themselves betwixt and between; being simultaneously masters of their craft and no longer needed at work can leave them asking, "Where is my place? Where do I belong?" All these periods of vocational questioning fit Turner's (1967) phrase, "betwixt and between" and his understanding of van Gennep's conception of liminality.

Following the educator's successful transition or passage, he or she aggregates in a new context (to use Turner's language). This stage has its own joys and, obviously, its own challenges. The educator experiences joy and excitement at having had the paper accepted, at having received the promotion (with the concomitant increase in salary), at having been awarded the status of tenure, or at having been given the desired position in a different school. Our human ability to adapt to our environment means that we quickly get used to this new status or these new circumstances. At that, the initial joy and excitement may be tempered by new professional expectations such as increased service on committees. In cases where someone shifts jobs, the excitement may be tempered by the need to memorize some new numbers and learn new procedures, let alone the challenge of sorting out the unwritten social traditions and codes of the new workplace.

Sometimes the educator's successful transition is internal rather than an observable transition in post or place. Some educators discover through the application and interview processes required to change jobs that the new position they had in view is actually closed to them because of external factors. Or perhaps the liminal character of the process leads them to change their minds. In this liminal space, they may wonder, "What now?" In

---

*We want to recognize that liminal periods are difficult, but they offer opportunities for learning.*

---

such cases, they might find the strength and resources to awaken to new possibilities in their

current post and place, entering it with new eyes, new understanding, and new commitment to the work before them. However, one might also remain in this "What now?" liminal space for an extended time, leaving the individual educator feeling bewildered.

We want to recognize that liminal periods are difficult, but they offer opportunities for learning. Van Gennep and Turner both note that liminal times are times of instruction and learning.

---

*However, we note that while we believe instruction to be available in liminal times and spaces, those who wander through the liminal without awareness or willingness will not be able to learn actively in and through those spaces and transitions.*

---

In the cultural settings they described, instruction is exactly the right term. However, we note that while we believe instruction to be available in liminal times and spaces, those who wander through the liminal without awareness or willingness will not be able to learn actively in and through those spaces and transitions. Educators who are traveling through transitions have the opportunity to learn from the instruction available in the liminal. But to learn in this way requires adopting certain dispositions and taking certain actions.

Educators making transitions in their careers are wise to first acknowledge that they are entering a liminal time (Rundle, 2015) and take on the desire to learn through this time. Learning requires listening- not simply hearing other voices, but intentional listening for understanding. If this is not a natural disposition, we suggest choosing to listen more than to speak. Listening also requires you to develop time and space for inner dialogue in quiet solitude. In your listening, you might ask yourself and reflect in your journaling your authentic responses to the following questions- What were the forces and voices that originally drew you into teaching? What are some of the

salient joys and sorrows of one's current work? What are the roots of the desire to make a transition at this time? Additionally, listening with

---

*Educators making transitions in their careers are wise to first acknowledge that they are entering a liminal time (Rundle, 2015) and take on the desire to learn through this time. Learning requires listening- not simply hearing other voices, but intentional listening for understanding. If this is not a natural disposition, we suggest choosing to listen more than to speak. Listening also requires you to develop time and space for inner dialogue in quiet solitude.*

---

your community of practice and engaging in honest dialogue with wise friends and colleagues whom one trusts will support one's discernment work through these and other questions that emerge. Finally, we recommend that educators read (or read again) some of the books that influenced one's original vocational decisions. We think, for example, of a volume that has helped thousands of educators clarify their thinking about the teaching vocation: Parker Palmer's (1998) *The Courage to Teach*.

Transitions in educational careers are not always easy, but we believe that educators who adopt learning and listening dispositions and actions can flourish. Transitions in educational careers have the power to transform educators from who they are or have been to who they are not yet.

Between physical and digital. A third liminal space educators experience is that between physical and digital learning contexts. Educators worked in this tension before the pandemic but it came into much clearer focus in early 2020. As we attempt to understand what role technology has and will have in education—with or without a pandemic—we must remain mindful and responsive to our

ways of knowing and our students' ways of knowing. We believe that Rundle's (2015) insistence that liminal spaces require acknowledgement is especially important regarding the differences between physical and online teaching and learning. In our view, online learning is transformative, not simply additive. This liminal space requires us to understand that our students now have a different epistemology—actually a kind of e-pistemology because of their status as digital natives—and all educators must learn how to work with that shift. Expanding our teaching repertoires to include digital learning contexts does not ordinarily require us to abandon physical learning contexts. However, if we are to cultivate and sustain responsive learning communities, we must find or establish border crossing points between these two complimentary learning contexts so that we can move effectively between them. We must identify what barriers we have encountered in the past and take note how we worked through or around them. And we should take note of and share what we learned in these liminal times and spaces.

We noted earlier that the phrase “when this is over” has become common during the pandemic. Another phrase that many educators have heard is that “it is not going back to what it was.” Perhaps K-12 and higher educators have more in common with the Masai boy or girl than we predicted. For example, students at all levels may never return to face-to-face learning in the numbers to which we became accustomed. And students in higher education have already protested being charged athletic and student association fees when they are studying long distances from campus. Clearly, educators at all levels will need to adapt when this is over ... or right now.

Even though most of them are digital natives, since the winter and spring of 2020, thousands of pre-service teachers have seen their teaching placements become online only or online and face-to-face simultaneously. In the January 2020 term, any who were in school placements had to switch from face-to-face teaching to online teaching on the same day their co-operating teachers switched. Many pre-service teachers who graduated in 2020 or 2021 wish that they could have had more face-to-face teaching experience. The barriers they had to overcome because of the

pandemic may have made their experience more akin to van Gennep's paradigm cases.

If education itself is somehow betwixt and between during the pandemic, we perhaps have a disadvantage that, for example, the Masai boy who must survive alone for a week does not have. This boy knows what lies on the other side of his week alone; his community will welcome him home and consider him a man. We do not know what the other side looks like when we ask how educators will do their work after the pandemic.

## Conclusion

The ideas of liminality, liminal times, and liminal spaces can yield insight to anyone in transition, including educators. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the whole world found itself in a liminal place in early 2020. At the time of writing, we all wait for an ending for which we have no specific date and only fuzzy and conflicting criteria regarding what will constitute the ending. Because of the disruptions to face-to-face learning in early 2020, educators everywhere, like many professionals, found themselves in unexpected spaces. The unexpected shift to online learning spaces while teaching from a make-shift office in a corner of our house or kitchen table was complicated further by our sudden need to be able to troubleshoot challenges with no or low internet access for us, our families, and our students. On van Gennep's account, this liminal period offers educators an opportunity to develop new understandings of their work. Certainly, educators have had to learn new teaching methods and strategies during the pandemic. But we want to extend van Gennep's principle and ask what we might learn about the deeper questions of education. What are its purposes? Why do we structure it the ways we do? Why does it look so similar everywhere in the world? What other ways might teachers and students connect with each other and relate to each other? Were he directing a podcast to educators today, van Gennep might well join many educational professionals and ask how we can emerge from the pandemic with transformed understandings of education and our roles in it. We noted earlier the current running through some educational discourse that no one is sure what normal will look like in education once the pandemic is over.

Without doubt, we live and educate in a liminal time, a time between what some call normal or the old normal and whatever forms education will take when the pandemic is over. During this interstitial time—this liminal time—between two normals, we might take up van Gennep's invitation. We know we are dealing with forces beyond our control but to the degree that part of our passage, of our transformation, during this time is within our control, we should approach the pandemic as intentional learning educators.

Christian educators bring their own perspective to the liminal time in which the pandemic has placed all educators. First, we can awaken or re-awaken to the signs of God's presence. We read the account of Jacob's dream as a kind of assurance that God was with Jacob and that God filled the space between heaven and earth during Jacob's liminal time. As Christian educators, can we allow the relatively straightened circumstances in which we may find ourselves because of the pandemic and other factors to lead us toward new spiritual postures, new ways of listening for God's voice and seeing God's work? Can we trust God to teach us through our multidimensional identities while we work in this liminal space? Can we learn in the liminal and allow God to transform those unstable spaces into stable places where we sense that we

---

*As Christian educators, can we allow the relatively straightened circumstances in which we may find ourselves because of the pandemic and other factors to lead us toward new spiritual postures, new ways of listening for God's voice and seeing God's work? Can we trust God to teach us through our multidimensional identities while we work in this liminal space? Can we learn in the liminal and allow God to transform those unstable spaces into stable places where we sense that we belong?*

---

belong? We noted in our introduction that new meanings have been added to the concept of liminality in the century since van Gennep introduced the concept. The most common of those additions relates to the experience a person or group of people has of being in a moment or in a state of knowing that something spiritual has just transpired. Can Christian educators in a pandemic frame the pandemic as such a moment, asking how God is present? Can we even claim joy in God's presence during the pandemic?

In the midst of this ambiguity, we believe that we can rest on some certainties. Again, we do not know the end date, but we do know that a cloud of witnesses is giving us the wave as we do the difficult work of educating during a pandemic (Hebrews 12:1). To the degree that the pandemic has become a time of testing, we can perhaps take some comfort in Paul's words that tribulation will actually produce some good (Romans 5:1-5). That good ought to include some new perspectives on pedagogy but, as we noted above, it may also include new insights into the deepest questions about education and what education might look like during what we call normal times.

## References

- Bell, G. (2021). Pandemic passages: An anthropological account of life and liminality during COVID-19. *Anthropology in Action*, 28(1).  
<https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/aia/28/1/aia280115.xml>
- Carnes, M. C. (2004). The liminal classroom. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51(9).  
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-liminal-classroom/>
- Duncan, A., Schleicher, A., Mourshed, M., Nuzzo, J., Woessmann, L., Babones, S., Kapur, S., Smith, M. D., & Startz, D. (September 5, 2020). Will schools and universities ever return to normal?: Nine experts on the future of education after the pandemic. *Financial Post*.  
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/05/education-schools-universities-future-after-pandemic/>
- Durkheim, E. (1915). *The elementary forms of the religious life*. Translated by Joseph Swain. Free Press.
- Hill, P., & Jochim, A. (October 29, 2020). Can public education return to normal after the COVID-19 pandemic? *Brookings Center*.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2020/10/29/can-public-education-return-to-normal-after-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- Holley, J. (1977). Tenure and research productivity. *Research in Higher Education*, 6, 181-192.
- Hopkins, G. M. (1985). *God's grandeur. Poems and prose*. Penguin.
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach*. Jossey-Bass.
- Rundel, T. J. (2015). *Liminal spaces: A narrative spirituality of the Bible*. Doctor of ministry dissertation at George Fox [Portland] Seminary.  
<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1109&context=dminhttp://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/dmin/109>
- Shaw, A., & Lazear, E. P. (2008). Tenure and output. *Labour Economics*, 15(4) 704-723.
- Turner, V. (1967). *The forest of symbols*. Cornell University Press.
- van Gennep, A. (1909, 1960). *The rites of passage*. University of Chicago Press.
- Yancey, G. A. (2011). *Compromising scholarship: Religious and political bias in American higher education*. Baylor University Press.