

DWELLERS ON THE THRESHOLD



“I'm a dweller on the threshold
And I'm waiting at the door
And I'm standing in the darkness
I don't want to wait no more.”

Van Morrison, 1982.

Simon Cross

INTRODUCTION

Human beings have been keeping cats for a long time. Their ability to get rid of vermin had long made them a very useful creature, but it was their soft hair, warm bodies and charismatic personalities that sealed the deal. Today there is a special place for felines in the life of humans around the world. We've been keeping them for several thousands of years, probably not as long as dogs, but for a substantial period of time nonetheless. And it's often suggested, of course, that cats keep humans rather than the other way around, and there's something true about that, we take care of them, feed them, house them, get them medical treatment: and in return they wonder about leaving hair behind... Far more than their canine companions, cats seem to know how to get the best (for them) out of us.

But cats are not only ordinary companion animals, for a very long time they've been seen as somehow special, sometimes feared and sometimes deified: and that's because they're boundary crossers. Slipping in and out of shadows, they seem to have an ability to transcend the distinctions between worlds and realities. Their knowing eyes and languid insouciance tell those inclined to believe in such things that cats know far more than we suspect they do. That they understand more than we think. This is exemplified by their apparent loathing for closed doors, their consistent desire to go through them and in to spaces which are closed off to them. Cats represent something important, the idea of boundaries between realities, and the possibility that we might repeatedly breach them. Neither fully of this world nor fully of another, they live in an in-between space, a place of shadows into which they can slink and gracefully disappear. In this way, cats have long been thought to dwell in on a threshold, in a space which we might call 'liminal'.

LIMINALITY (YOU'VE BEEN STRUCK BY A SMOOTH LIMINAL...)

The concept of "liminality" refers to the idea of an in-between stage: a point when one has crossed, or is at the point of crossing, a significant boundary from one form of reality, but has not yet either reached or fully entered into, another. A straightforward example is adolescence, when a young person has left, or is leaving childhood, but has yet to enter fully into being an adult. Vocal changes, physical changes, mental changes... No longer fully a child, nor yet fully an adult: they are in a liminal state. In various cultures, at various times, ways have been found to engage with this sense of liminality, and to usher a person from one side of the threshold to another, we call these 'rites of passage'. Such rites have been known to include

initiation ceremonies such as those where a young person must kill an animal to demonstrate their movement to adulthood, or must survive some kind of test (real or simulated) of strength or skill. While this may seem out of our experience, consider some of the rites of passage with which we are more familiar – the wedding ceremony for example, the liminal space of the church aisle, the ritual of waiting before entering into the new reality of marriage from the previous reality of singleness.

There are many liminal stages in life, more than just the transition from childhood to adulthood, or from unmarried to married, from unborn to born. One that I encounter very frequently is that of a transition point between a simplistic belief (or disbelief) in God, to a more complex and nuanced perspective (or series of perspectives) on ideas of the divine. In many ways this is as natural a process as the process of physical maturation, and might initially be characterised as a three-stage process (a thesis put forward by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (Van Gennep 2019) who is credited with the invention of the term ‘liminal’): Firstly there is the pre-liminal, effectively the childhood phase. This is characterised by a very simple and straightforward approach to ideas and concepts: One and one are two. We are human, God is divine. We are weak, he/she is powerful. Etc. The point when this stage usually begins to come to an end, is when the individual (or in some cases the group) encounters some issue or question which does not conform to their expectation. I often talk about this as a ‘crisis’ - frequently it is concerned with a death, or a relationship problem. In any case it’s something which jars us from our reality, like a massive hormonal spike, and pushes us into a liminal place. The educationalist Glynis Cousin refers to the idea of ‘threshold concepts’ to illustrate how this same thing works in teaching. When someone encounters a ‘threshold concept’ they shift their thinking to accommodate it, but in the process of doing so they occupy a liminal state. The job of a skilled teacher is to encourage the student to move through this liminal state in a good way, and to accommodate their new understanding of the world. She points out too that this journey through a liminal space “involves identity shifts which can entail troublesome, unsafe journeys..” (Cousin 2006 p4)

So it’s important to understand that the second stage of the process, the liminal stage, can be troubling on a number of levels, it can pose profound existential questions with which the person may find it very difficult to engage. There are a number of features that characterise this stage of life: there is a feeling of aloneness, of isolation, which hits a lot of people. A sense that they are, if not the first person to go through it, at least more or less alone in going through it now. This is the great value of the ritualised rite of passage of course, it reassures and

demonstrates that there are many in the same position, that this is normal. Regrettably though there is no rite of passage available for people making the shift from a childlike understanding of God, to a more sophisticated one. One of the things that this breeds, is another characteristic of this stage, arrogance. A sense that suddenly the individual has transcended the knowledge and understanding of their peers. That while others are children, they have grown to become an adult. That in their discarding of childish ideas, they have become greater. Ironically however, this only serves to demonstrate the fact that they remain in liminal place, a mature approach is more integrative and accepting than judgemental. This stage can also be characterised by a sense of great unease, anxiety about the loss of certainty, concern that it may never return, and worry that this has potential for serious consequences.

The Christian and Jewish traditions have a number of exemplar liminal spaces, most obvious is 'the wilderness', the Exodus has the Israelites stuck in the wilderness neither slaves nor yet truly free, Jesus spent time in the wilderness as a rite of passage between carpenter's son, and rabbi. There are other liminal spaces too – pits, graves, caves, the belly of a whale, even the cross, places between what was, and what yet will be. One of the things that this shows us is how we humans all spend much of our time in these liminal spaces, we are dwellers on the threshold for large parts of our lives. And that is difficult.

There is of course, a third stage to the process, the post-liminal. This is the point when the changes consequent from those initial troubling questions have taken place, the post-liminal is the changed state. The re-emergence, blinking, into the daylight from the shadows. The post-liminal is a transformed state, it is the time when we come down from the mountain with our faces bright. When we walk among our friends, unrecognisable. When we return to the tribe as an adult, having left as a child. When we arrive at our destination unknown, amid the acrid stench of whale vomit. Because the liminal state cannot last, it cannot be properly sustained over a very long period of time, except perhaps by cats. The intensity is too much, it is too draining.

One of the keys to surviving the liminal stage, despite its troubling lack of ritualised rites of passage, is to look for someone who has passed this way before: a guide, a supporter, a teacher, coach or midwife. Someone with the ability to understand the difficulties of the liminal stage, and to help us through them. They help us not to rush the process, a child is should be born only when it is ready, and a key Christian metaphor has long been that of being 'born again'. While this has been taken to mean many things, it's worth consciously reflecting on in the context of liminality. Those of us who dwell on the threshold, slipping and winding like black

cats through the shadows of the in-between-time, must be looking for the way through, that moment of re-birth. That point when we come out of the darkness, and out in to the light. The process of birth is markedly helped by the presence of a midwife, and/or a doula, just as so many of the rites of passage in our lives are helped by those with the subtle skill and experience to help us navigate them. If you find yourself in a liminal space, as you will inevitably do at various times in your life: dwelling on another threshold, look for help from those who have already passed that way, you may recognise them from their shining faces, their rough desert clothes, or from the overpowering smell of whale vomit, or maybe even sometimes from the holes in their hands and feet.

Bibliography

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<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/ant-18.html>

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