

Chapter Three

Learning the Intentional Containing Space

The banks of a river provide a constant structure that allows water freedom to flow and bounce and sparkle in a chaotic dance of balance and beauty.

– Eila Carrico¹

One important facet of the middle or transitional space is its boundaries. When we are in unfamiliar territory, we try to find its extent, its walls or the containment of its space so that we are not free-floating without the potential for an anchor. We want to know our parameters. We need something solid to hold onto in the midst of flow, especially if the waters are moving quickly and unpredictably. Sometimes we turn to friends or family to hold us steady; other times we repeat phrases we learned long ago to make some kind of explanation for tragedy. When disruption occurs, we try and find something that “contains” or eases our fear and anxiety.

With our water metaphor, we focus on the flow itself, not passively going along to get along, but to learn from the flow and to tap into what is already all around us creating enough

safety that we can “live into” the movement, whether fast, turbulent, slow or smooth. Think about where water goes. The wellspring flows into the stream which flows into the river which flows to the lake or the great sea. In this flow, we find ourselves moving along particular paths that are contained by land: the hole through which the water rises from deep within the earth, the banks of the stream, the river- or lake-bed, the delta and the ocean floor. The rock and soil that contain the water’s flow are aligned with it, but also are affected by it; rock and soil are agile because they move as they are eroded by the pressure of the water. However, the changing container does not mean it disappears. Water is contained in some fashion or the entire globe would be inundated with it, and only water creatures and plants could survive.

The nature of a container is that of a solid that holds something else that is either a smaller solid, liquid or gas. The container gives shape to the substance it surrounds or covers a substance to protect it and keep it from deteriorating as quickly as it otherwise might. It aligns with what it contains, holding it in a particular shape and place.

Liminal space, the in-between “this” or “that,” and a combination of “this” and “that,” is surrounded in temporal terms. In other words, there is a starting point and an end point that define the middle space. Yet, there is more to containing this space than its beginning and ending. To navigate the unknown well, we bring our inner knowledge and habits with us at the starting place where we cross into threshold. In intentional liminality, we also may need a skilled facilitator to “hold space” when there is work to be done. Otto Scharmer, mentioned in Chapter One, describes this container in *Theory U* as a circle of relationship that must be “charged” with two elements: unconditional care that is listening without judgment with an open spirit and the courage to let go and surrender.² If the facilitator can charge the container in this way and invite others to do so, then the collective presence is a different quality than a conversation group or a meeting; the group has entered liminal space where people’s former selves are included and their future selves are emerging. Many awareness-raising or creativity circles know this principle to be true.

Gestalt theory uses this understanding of “container” in its practice of encountering the whole person in dialogue. When the coach or therapist initiates a relational field between her or him and the client(s) by raising awareness of surroundings, staying in the present moment and listening actively, this is considered a “container.”³ Amy Edmondson, Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, adds that psychological safety is important in a container and necessary for any learning to occur:

In psychologically safe environments, people believe that, if they make a mistake, others will not penalize or think less of them for it. They also believe that others will not resent or humiliate them when they ask for help or information. . . . Psychological safety does not imply a cozy situation in which people are necessarily close friends. Nor does it suggest an absence of pressure or problems.⁴

Similarly, Mary Pierce Brosmer, founder of *Women Writing for (a) Change* and consultant for transformational work to business organizations and schools, has spent decades developing leadership through the art of writing. She defines the nature of the container as Scharmer does (and, indeed, refers to Scharmer, Wheatley, and others as influencers for her thinking).⁵ She describes the work of the container as collecting a community in a particular place, with a ritual of gathering, being together and leave-taking. It is in the ritual that a circle is opened and then closed, with the time and space between opening and closing where the creative work, often transformative, takes place. A participative facilitator “holds the space,” to allow others to express themselves as deeply as they are willing and able, relating rather than creating or identifying roles.⁶ Brosmer says:

By *container*, I mean the organizational universe, encompassing all aspects of how a group lives: time, physical space, money, relational agreements, food, and ritual. The word container has many analogues:

ecosystem, home, womb. Anything that maintains the delicate balance between open space and boundaries and allows life to emerge is the container.⁷

I joined one of the women's writing groups developed by Brosmer during a particularly difficult season at one point in my life, walking into the first meeting wounded and unsure of my own next steps to free myself of a micromanaging environment that affected my leadership in ways that countered my creativity, growth and maturation. I also was grieving how the environment was hurting the whole organization at the time. I knew that my story was not unique; many have experienced the pain of anxious organizations who do not manage their collective anxiety well. I needed an outlet that was safe and at the same time challenging so that I could find my way out of a very unhealthy situation. A friend of mine from another, similar organization invited me to attend her group. I trusted her judgment and her facilitation from past experience and so decided to spend the time and energy to move into this writing-for-healing space.

My friend and another facilitator, both named Lisa, held the container for the women gathered every Monday night for twelve weeks. My friend did so by greeting us, lighting a candle to pass around the circle as we named ourselves into the space, reading a poem, having us write about something in the poem that caught our attention, fostering small group discussion which turned into deep sharing, more free-writing time, reading our work to each other, then closing the circle by naming what was important or what we noticed, followed by passing the candle again, but in the opposite direction. What seemed like a simple ritual became a powerful container, allowing participants to delve more deeply each week into the joys and pains of life, but also to discover both inner and collective power that was indeed, transformative. Belief systems shifted, minds changed, people who might have been polarized about political or social issues found ways to speak with each other with humor and care. I myself began to develop a dream for my own work in the future, far away from the workplace that was so toxic to me.

Without this contained space in which I found freedom to give myself permission to get a little wild with my dreaming, I am not sure that I would have found a new way forward, complete with educational re-tooling, coaching training and certification and creating new business networks. This circle was my liminal space and I worked hard, laughed, cried and felt anger and joy in it, because it was supportive, defined, and facilitated well, containing the creative flow just enough to allow freedom to reframe my perspective.⁸

The point here is not to emulate a writing circle for women or men, but to understand the nature of a container when an individual or group is on a journey in liminal space. A skilled facilitator creates a sense of intentionality in the midst of risk, through a trajectory of time spent with a great deal of freedom built in. There is welcome and closure at each gathering, drawing people in and then sending them back into the world for a time but, with new insight or new questions, complete with a subsequent action plan for change. The space is dialogical, with parameters set for adopting a learning posture, while at the same time honoring one's own self. The space also needs to be honored for a time so that growth and, ultimately, transformation has potential to evolve – the future emerges this way, paradoxically contained and free.

Practical Matters

FACILITATING A LEARNING TEAM IN LIMINAL SPACE – THE LEADER

There are several roles in containers. First, the facilitator-leader creates the atmosphere that both provides safety and invites risk of vulnerability and letting go. She or he participates briefly by not only creating the foundation for the conversation or silence by example, but also doing so without losing the sense of guiding the process for the sake of all others present. The intention is to create in-between space where generative conversation can occur.

When tensions rise, the facilitator acknowledges them and makes sure that voices are honored respectfully; listening is more important than speaking in these spaces, though speaking one's own truth also matters greatly. Friction is

likely to arise in vulnerable spaces when a deep belief system is revealed, accompanied by the deep emotions that have shaped the belief in the first place. Thus, when vulnerability is tested, people are taking a chance that they will not be attacked or manipulated by persons with differing belief systems. Such attacks occur frequently in our society; witness reports in the broadcast media and newspaper press of attacks on and by public figures, hate groups, and in work conflicts, family conflicts and, yes, Facebook threads. The need to be correct and the ingrained need to “win” in competitive cultures can make vulnerability a liability rather than a gift. Zero-sum thinking, where one cannot win unless someone else loses, makes sense in the realm of sports but does not have to be the model businesses follow, especially with internal personnel. Changing the world for the better by finding unique niches and complementary industries serves a higher purpose promoting powerful, positive change.

To foster trust, a facilitator invites bravery in a space that has some very clear guidelines about how people will communicate and honor each other. The group itself can create an agreement about how it operates as long as this honoring of others’ voices is included. Otherwise, the dynamic will never transcend either uniformity or disgruntlement and some people will remain closed and fearful while others dominate the conversation. Over time, as conversation and shared presence deepens, the agreement may become outdated and need to be revised. If trust is shared among participants and if the facilitator is trusted, then people begin to learn new things while letting go of old things, difficult as that may be, such as foundations for belief systems or self-images that may not serve them or anyone else well on individual and organizational levels alike.

Belief systems are often very strong because they are foundations for our thoughts and behavior. At some level, they served us well. However, as we grow, we receive new information and experience new events. Beliefs need to grow with the expansion of knowledge and experience. However, change at this level can shake one’s whole world. A container holds the space and the flow enough that deep change can be possible without overwhelming a person or a whole system.

For example, I have encountered many persons of faith who insist that the (positive) behavior of the Church should never change because Jesus created the Church in a certain way. The only change since Jesus' time is modern plumbing, technology, automobiles and church architecture. When they begin to understand that Jesus did not create the Church and was not a Christian, their belief systems crumble. They have a choice at this point. They can fight the information that has been revealed and insist that their teaching from childhood stands, or they can adopt a sense of curiosity, perhaps in the midst of grief at letting go of long-held assumptions, and find out more. A skilled facilitator will gently foster their curiosity without judging the assumptions held for a lifetime. If people trust the facilitator, they are more likely to learn and move to a new system of beliefs.

People are greatly helped if there is ritual in business meetings or family gatherings, especially in times of disruption or discord. In times of crisis, ritual is even more important, whether performed as a steadying habit, or invented as a new focus for grounding in the midst of fear. In fact, ritual whether secular or religious, helps people trust that the space they enter is predictable enough that it will indeed "hold" them should the unpredictable insight, revelation, or conflict occur. Rituals might include a certain way of greeting as each enters the space, or a certain question or reading that begins the time together. Rituals include a reminder of purpose, honoring time and relationship, and conclude with a prompt, appropriate ending that consistently has a sending forth element to it. Closing container space and time with a promise to meet again as scheduled, without exception, provides a foundation from which people can take risks. Group centering in this way allows the individual to center in her or his own being, which makes risk possible.

PARTICIPATING IN A GROUP IN LIMINAL SPACE

Whether participating as an employee, or through common interest, with friends or to converse with people from other cultures, those who cross into the work of transformation by wanting to move beyond their current home of belief need to encounter some of the limits and also freedoms of the

container. Boundaries are set for protection; freedom is open for searching and creative curiosity based on all that each participant brings to the table. Thus, liminal space is begun and liminal thinking can occur.

Dave Gray asserts, "There are opportunities around you all the time, every day, and, in many cases, you are unable to see them, because limiting belief blinds you to real possibilities. Liminal thinking is a way to identify limiting beliefs and open yourself to hitherto unseen possibilities that can open new doors."⁹ Before such shifts can occur, one has to be involved in the right container. One also has to be willing to bring the whole self to the group occupying this space after a natural testing period to ascertain if trust is possible.

To begin the journey into in-between space, a number of preconditions need to exist. If someone is interested in maintaining her or his lens on the world without exception, whatever the motive for doing so (and there are many), and if this desire is reinforced by a person's surroundings and relationships, then there is little incentive to change personally, professionally, or relationally. In this case, liminal work is not right for the moment unless a person is forced into change by external, unintentional disruption. Therefore, the first precondition to participation in threshold work is to recognize one's own inability to know what one doesn't know or experience what one has not (yet) encountered. After realizing one's incapacity to know and experience all perspectives, naming naming a problematic stance that has heretofore been assumed to be universally true coupled with a desire to expand one's thinking, then the most crucial step for liminal work has taken place. Business leaders and teams, nonprofit organizations, religious congregations and various social-political movements all must meet this precondition before voluntarily entering liminal space with positive intent.

Another precondition is the willingness to hear and recount stories. In the business world, in particular, stories occur over lunch or during breaks but rarely in the meeting room, unless they are tools in presenting a particular proposal or evaluative point. Stories in other sectors play a more vital role in the day-to-day work of employees, volunteers or networks. Telling stories as anecdotes on the frontlines in the midst of crisis eases

the sense of being alone and helps mitigate potential burnout. Liminal space requires storytelling to uncover the truth about each other while building relationships or responding to an emergency, whether engaging a working relationship that has potential for more depth and creativity, or a more informal relationship that is deepening and broadening networks. With storytelling come emotive responses, which may vary among participants. Allowing for different responses is essential, acknowledging that one's own worldview or belief system should not, and cannot, dominate the conversation and yet should not be subordinate to it either.

This leads us to the final precondition. Liminal space is filled with a diversity of belief systems, some of which may be based on social location (all those qualities that we have inherited or learned, physical and mental, including race, gender, sexuality, culture, religion, education level and economic class), some of which may be based on life-mindset (such as values that are couched in fear, love, adventure, anger, contentment and so on). To participate fully and to walk toward transformation, one has to expect to encounter difference. The awkwardness that almost always automatically arises from this encounter with diversity creates a desire within the group to diffuse it, which either leads to creative conversation and innovation or to conflict and shutdown. Finding common ground while honoring difference is an act unto itself that begins a transformative process for people; however, one must be capable of living a learning posture, open to questioning and curiosity about self and others without reverting into defensiveness or denial.

In other words, curiosity and a spirit of exploration may be nascent at the cusp of liminal space but, with good facilitation and commitment from participants, these learning postures expand as people move more deeply into the depths of their being by telling the stories they carry within them. Some of these stories may never have been told before, which often leads to a breakthrough for the teller and perhaps the listener. They also lead to innovations in belief systems and perspectives, which in turn can change the direction of businesses, their products and the audiences they target, the foci and work approach of nonprofit organizations and the nature of spiritual presences in community.

At the same time, learning postures do not negate belief systems that may be important to sustain. One does not enter liminal space to lose identity but to change one's understanding of identity. Our foundational center remains grounded in a very broad sense. For example, if one approaches this space with an ethic of love that has not seen the light of day for some time due to work pressures and exhaustion, then the space calls forth this deep, inner conviction rather than trying to change it. When the depth of our best self comes forth, we are capable of changing beliefs, worldview and behavior without losing ourselves to conformity or uniformity. Herein lies the personal container, or an ultimate unshakeability, which some might call safety, as differentiated from the group container. Acknowledging one's deepest awareness, value and passion on a personal level breaks through our normal self-protection in liminal space and, in turn, contributes meaningfully to the liminal work of the team or group:

Getting clear on our value and our team members' values will revolutionize our company and create lanes where none might have existed before – instead of a ten-person race, we start to develop a coordinated relay in which team members baton-toss to each other's strengths instead of vying to run the whole stretch alone. Once everyone understands their value, we stop hustling for worthiness and lean into our gifts.¹⁰

These commitments to awareness, value, and passion influence each other into a higher, more complex way of knowing and experiencing, thereby moving individuals and teams into the threshold of transformational work.

Unintentional Liminal Space

During extreme duress, such as living through natural disasters, global pandemics, market crashes, terrorist attacks, lethal or maiming hate crimes, unexpected deaths or, in many countries, genocide, civil war, refugee movements, immigration "trains" and unaccounted for "disappearances"

of the citizenry, people are thrown into liminal space. Life will never be what it was hours or days ago and the future is uncertain and perhaps unimaginable.

It is in these times that we see the worst and best of humanity. Some take full advantage of others' loss, grief and pain, making money or media soundbites on the back of victims or exploiting difficult situations for personal, often financial, gain. The opposite is also true. Others rally to support, advocate and provide alternatives for victims, working hard to move with them from victimhood to survival. Victims themselves often rally together so that they know they are not alone. The sense of belonging is crucial when people experience shock and are thrown into deep loss and uncertainty. Trauma like this can affect one person, a group, whole populations and countries. COVID-19, the global pandemic landing at the beginning of a new decade (2020), resulted in varied responses. Some world leaders were quick to provide testing and protect the population as much as they could, and others brushed off the problem until it became so dire that escalating death tolls devastated nation-states. People were quarantined, "sheltering in place," all over the world. Panic ruled the airwaves and social media. At the same time, something else emerged: new ways of creating community, advancing technologies and their uses, and understandings of how to remain social in the midst of physical distancing. The impacts of the pandemic still remain to be seen over the next decades, but it is clear that business-as-usual is long gone and that the entire globe is in disrupted, liminal space. The great curiosity will be what the new equilibrium looks like even as we move through chaos, fear, and grief.

Another example of extreme disruption, one of many in history, is the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which changed the life of the Portuguese population and also had lasting impact on European understanding of religion and social life. Lisbon was one of the five largest cities in Europe at that time and an important coastal trading center for Europe. The whole population of Lisbon, with estimated instant losses of 70,000 people, was catapulted into instant liminality.¹¹ The earthquake struck while much of the population was in church on All Saints' Day, which exacerbated the religious and psychological trauma:

Stone churches collapsed onto their congregations. The royal palace and many stone mansions crumbled. The ocean pulled back to expose the rubble on the floor of the harbor, and the tsunami scoured the waterfront portions of the city. Fires began that burned for several days. Tens of thousands died. It was a huge earthquake, centered on the Atlantic floor, estimated at nine on the Richter scale, devastating as far away as Morocco, felt as far away as northern Europe, with tsunami waves that reached Ireland and North Africa.¹²

One of Portugal's chief ministers, serving under King José I, used this liminal space-time to update building codes and evict the Jesuits with whom he had political difficulty. Theological debates broke out all over Europe about natural disasters and the all-powerful God. Political and religious or ideological change occurred because of this great upheaval. Social scientist and anthropologist Bjørn Thomassen, describes the earthquake as having ramifications at every level of human life, shaking the optimism of Europe's philosophers and religious leaders: ". . . as a single rupture, it exerted a huge impact on Europe's intellectual life. It helped to shape the entire Enlightenment. It was a formative impact on a series of thinkers, including Kant."¹³

Leaders who know how to navigate this kind of liminal space are crucial in times of disruption and disaster; good leaders command and control in wise ways, simply to work for the victims' survival in pandemics, natural disasters, or other times when evacuation or an immediate plan for physical safety is needed. Liminal space is forced on victims. Rescue workers respond by navigating the physical space. There are also leaders who do the emotional and spiritual work with those experiencing extreme disruption; they come as the second wave of response. In these situations, creating a container of (relative) safety is essential to ease people through shock, grief, despair and the gamut of emotions accompanying shattering change. Then there are leaders who begin to interpret the event and respond to it, either for good or for ill. These leaders shape the future of the belief system held by much of the population affected, as well as those who hear about the events on the news.

I am reminded of the visit I made to El Salvador in 2008 with a small group of students from all walks of life, right before a political change in government occurred in 2009, when the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) came to power. It did not take long to see that the entire country was in a state of post-traumatic stress as a result of ongoing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) violence and guerrilla response. We spent some time with a Roman Catholic sister working in some of the villages there. She knew every villager's personal story and she gave us the hard facts regarding the level of suffering the people had endured, watching from their hiding places as their village was destroyed and family members were shot. Sister Peggy introduced us to the few survivors in that particular region. Each time we made the acquaintance of these (mostly) young teenagers, she asked them to tell us their story. At first, I responded internally with my Midwestern-US sensibility that dictated my not intruding into others' lives. I also knew that I wasn't sure I could hear the horror and not break down. I realized after hearing two stories, with many more yet to come, that Sister Peggy had asked her friends to tell their experiences in as much detail as they could remember for a reason. She also asked us not to interrupt or ask questions.

In Sister Peggy's view, though controversial among trauma response experts, storytelling was the first step the traumatized speakers could take toward any semblance of healing after their violent separation from land and loved ones, life as they knew it.¹⁴ Our listening honored the importance of each person's experience and, at the same time, forced us to listen and learn. Their violently unintentional liminal space created our own, at least for those who did not shut down. Our political stances aside, many of us suddenly found ourselves unable to breathe, weeping openly, unable to look each other in the eye, filled with the deepest empathy and horror we have ever felt. A few group members did put up emotional barriers to the tales of atrocity, no longer participating in the trip, staying behind at our hostels to read novels and take naps unless we were traveling. Group dissent arose at the two different responses to the extreme stories, which I addressed as something the group needed to discuss in my presence. Several students

chose not to do so. It was easy for me to see the beginnings of group polarization and I knew that I needed to create a container where we could speak to each other honestly rather than shutting down.

Eventually, the entire group did come together to discuss how we all came to the situation with different capacities for listening and response based on our own worldviews and life-experiences in those weeks. However, only those who were committed to reflecting on what they had heard with open hearts were able to change their beliefs and worldviews. The others were not ready or, perhaps, not willing. The group still needed to honor these differences amidst the frustration, difficult as it was for them and me. To this day, one member of the group, Jay, a former corporate manager and now religious leader, regularly returns to El Salvador because his capacity for empathy and desire for solidarity blossomed in response to the pain he heard and saw. Before the trip, Jay was resentful that an academic degree requirement had forced him to travel at an inconvenient time. After the trip, he named his connection with the Salvadoran peoples through their stories and history as life-changing for him. Indeed, on one occasion he raised his own resources to travel there on the eve of a Salvadoran government election (2009) to aid the United Nations as an electoral observer.¹⁵

Such is the transformational nature of liminal space, which in this case was a cultural immersion trip that witnessed the forced liminality of those who had lost everything. It is a complex space, often emotionally charged and deeply painful until one is capable of enough reflection to make some meaning of, in this case, suffering and violent loss. Listening with learning posture, openness to internal and external change and a welcoming of difference create the right conditions for transformation, even in extreme circumstances.

Positives and Negatives

Entering liminal space, the middle or in-between transition from one state to another creates tremendous potential for transformation in one's thinking and experience, therefore shifting one's belief system. At the same time, this space

evokes the best self from deeply held convictions that may manifest themselves in new, more open and, perhaps, healthier ways. In other words, a person encountering the in-between is quite capable of moving, like a boat in the flow of water, without being easily swayed by the prevailing wind. As the container for the space is held well, the work of entry and the development of learning postures and storytelling frameworks, with acceptance of diverse perspectives and social locations, can begin to take shape.

The caution here is that water erodes earth and rock, or earth and rock give way and the container suddenly changes. Sometimes the flow pushes hard against the container and people are not ready for the disruption that flow often brings, or they may not have the capacity for movement. They can't quite suspend their own belief systems or reframe traumatic experiences or they are indeed easily swayed by every opinion, every prevailing wind. As a result, in the first case, disruption shuts them down and the container is not enough; they must create their own, isolated sense of safety. Or, if they have no grounding at all, the container doesn't matter; they are simply along for the ride and not interested in gaining depth. Facilitators and other participants face these dynamics in liminal space and will need to address them directly. Those who cannot move or move at every whim are less likely to be creative contributors to the space, its focus, and its process. Instead, they will seek to preserve themselves, perhaps at the expense of others' lives and well-being.

Containers matter. They allow for the collective unconscious to arise, for the best in people to emerge and for the future to unfold in adventuresome ways when held well. They can sustain the forces of conflict, the sudden changes of direction, and be as flexible as they need to. Leaders who hold containers for liminal work are themselves grounded learners, sitting in the posture of curiosity as participants move into the next iteration of their best selves.