

Introduction

The door, the ladder, the crossing, the maze, the bridge between two river banks - these are but a few of the symbols of passage, initiation and transformation which speak of dangerous and essential journeys.

Huck Finn floats down the river, and we know he has entered another state of being; his life shall never again be the same, and his very identity stands suspended, having entered a different category of existence, time, and space. He floats between the two solid shores, and the river both suspends and transports his unfinished life to uncertain places.

Midway through life's journey, Dante strays from the predictable roads of his past only to find himself isolated in a dark wood. A wilderness fills him with dread, and yet, his entrance into these shadows precipitates a harrowing journey through the hellish and the heavenly, the human and the divine.

Upon the face of the deep Noah huddles in his ark, surrounded by pairs of opposites, waiting out the indeterminate forty days. The deep, the chaos holding its own power, lifts the seeds of a new world to the solidity of a land somehow different now, after its washing.

As the desert becomes an unchosen home for Moses and his followers, and one year stretches into forty years, that which seemed temporary now becomes permanent. The children of Israel live on a bridge between captivity and the blessings of promise. On that bridge they encounter the best and the worst, the realization of divine presence and temptation to its abandonment. Only wilderness yields promise. When Moses finally waves his people on, he himself stays behind. He does so knowing his grave will be planted on the soil where many will be transformed.

Not by choice does Elijah flee and hide. Crisis leads his course, and his flight is less noble than it is desperate. If forty days in the cave of despair brings anything to Elijah, it is not a revelation of the sacred engendered by the outer veneer of storm and earthquake; it brings, rather, a still, quiet, and distant voice, more like an echo than anything else.

Not unlike Noah floating toward his new world, Moses and the children of Israel making their way through wilderness, and Elijah re-entering the womb of his cave, Jesus is compelled to enter that place and time named forty, which is also his flood, his wilderness, and his womb of transformation. There he faces his own greatness and the temptations that are inherent in it. Wrestling with the deepest and most powerful instincts, impulses, and drives, his spirit is refined until he discerns and finally submits to his highest loyalty. Then, and only then, is Jesus forged into the One who may speak with authority of a realm, reign, and empire which cannot be seen here or there, but must be known within, among, hidden, coming, and already present. Whether encompassed in forty days or forty years, symbolic time and space are marked off for the most significant transitions and initiations of our humanity.

In the following pages, inquiry and exploration shall take us to that sacred place found between places, that sacred time found between the times, and to the transformative power which grows in this fertile field of what has come to be called the liminal.

Through the examination of transitional social rites and rituals and their corresponding patterns of interior states of being, this study attempts to elucidate the nature of liminal reality. Transitional phenomena hold inherent and potential transformative power. For people of faith, and especially those in roles of religious leadership, this suggests not only a hermeneutical key and a pastoral method: it suggests new ways of understanding the very identity of those who dare to stand at the critical intersections found somewhere between here and there.