

Seven Practices for a Liminal Age

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Before the Covid-19 pandemic, over three hundred thousand people worked in the square mile of the City of London. The pavements were bustling with a blur of anonymous, grey-suited people, at least half of them speaking into mobile phones, destined for investment banks and finance companies. The traffic noise was relentless: red double-decker buses and black cabs thundering past, with dozens of bicycles dodging in between. This speed, this urgency, this anonymity, and the relentless acquisitive mindset of materialism are what the City calls the “real world.”

Counter to all my expectations about how my life should look, I am also one of those commuters and have been traveling into and out of the City for almost twenty years, even if at present the streets are more empty and half my working week is at home. My feet lead me down Bishopsgate on autopilot but, instead of through the shiny revolving doors of a corporation, they take me up a narrow alleyway flanked, on one side, by a 60-storey building of mirrored glass and, on the other, by the stone wall of a church built eight hundred years earlier. As is my habit, I run my fingers along the pale, irregular stone as I walk, and pass through the tall bronze-coloured gate into a tiny courtyard garden.

Those who stumble upon this garden are always taken by surprise. The sound of the traffic melts away, replaced by the sound of water flowing from a red stone fountain into a circular pond overhung by dark green foliage and a jungle of swaying purple flowers. The air smells different. The ground is paved with mosaics reflecting intricate

patterns. The ornate wrought-iron grilles and pale green olive trees evoke the days of Andalusia – blending Mediterranean freedom with Islamic order. More surprising still is that through the stone arch and carved oak doors sits a circular Bedouin tent made of woven goat hair. Its windows are sand blasted with the phases of the moon and the words of peace in seven different languages, including Arabic, Sanskrit, Inuit and Chinese.

This is St. Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace. It has all the hallmarks of liminal space. On entering, one senses instinctively that here the rules that govern the City do not apply. The word that comes to many people's minds is "oasis." Others have called it a "thin space" where the boundaries with the inner world are more pervious.

The threads of my own destiny which brought me here began to unfold in 2001, in the moment of dislocation when the world was reeling from the shock of 9/11. I was working on the trading floor of an investment bank when it happened. The bank had offices in Manhattan. We watched the moment the plane hit the South Tower in real time, on the huge television screens positioned around the floor. The moment was burned into my memory by the knowledge that we had colleagues inside. At the time, I had strong connections in the Muslim community and in the strange weeks that followed, as the world revealed itself to be a different place, my heart stirred with a calling to build bridges, to play a part in exposing the hidden dynamics which lay beneath this dramatic rupture, to help weave back together the splintered fabric of our world. I held this feeling close in my heart, unvoiced, and waited to see if it was real. Three years later, I was still in derivative sales when Al Qaeda's violence came so much closer. One of the suicide bombers was in Aldgate, just one tube station away from Liverpool Street, where I had alighted less than five minutes earlier. Then something shifted and my feet took me to this diminutive medieval church that I had passed many times without ever noticing, just a few hundred meters from the trading floor.

The destiny of St. Ethelburga's, like my own, was also shaped by politically motivated violence. The church was collateral damage in an IRA bomb that destroyed swathes of the City in the 1990s. The incendiary device was hidden in a lorry parked outside its wooden doors. In the stunned days after that event, the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, picked his way through the piles of rubble and shards of shattered glass, prayed for guidance, and saw how the church could be reborn as a place of reconciliation. Strangely, but as is often the case when one looks deeper, the seeds of this cross-cultural and inter-religious karma

were visible a century before when John Meadows Rodwell, rector in the 1870s, published the first reliable English translation of the Qu'ran. Ethelburga herself, a seventh-century Benedictine abbess, also had a fortune which echoes contemporary themes and liminal experiences. Following a vision of an intensely bright light, she gained her sainthood as a healer in the midst of a pandemic.

St. Ethelburga's Centre is a sacred space, a liminal space, that aspires to play a role in the evolution of spirituality and human culture. Its smallness belies the magnitude of its mission – how it is connected to a global network of similarly destined places and people – one of the nodes in a vast web seeking to give birth to the new. It is also a place full of stories, and we have learned to read its stories like signs that point out a pathway towards reconciliation in an age of global crisis. The story of the devastating bomb and an ancient church reincarnated as a peace center invites visitors to recognize the opportunity that lies at the heart of every crisis. The story of our patron saint heroically putting faith into action in dark times leads us to ask whether, when the chips are down, we shall have the courage to risk our own lives serving those in need? Standing between the Christian church and the Bedouin tent, two iconic buildings from vastly different cultures, visitors hear the call to bridge divisions, to build community across differences of all kinds. The story of a tiny church that stayed true to its spiritual purpose for centuries, despite now being dwarfed by the shiny symbols of materialism, speaks of the need to protect what is sacred. It invites visitors to consider: How shall I protect what matters most when it is under threat? The act of walking up the alleyway, separating from the world of consumerism, invites the question: Where is my thinking caught in an extractive mindset? The woven designs depicted in the mosaic paving hint at the universal structures of being that are hidden beneath the surface of our divided world. They ask: With what and whom are you interdependent? Are you living true to that knowledge? As you leaf through the rector's Qu'ran, its faded pages whisper: Can you see how the seeds of change are planted long before the door to transformation opens? Look, the East window, made from fragments of stained glass collected after the bomb, is catching the early morning sun. The dance of light and colour calls us to ask whether you can trust in the potential for rebirth. Can you see how beautiful new patterns emerge from the rubble of utterly demolished things?

These stories, these questions shape what unfolds here and have grown deep roots into my heart. I have tried to make St. Ethelburga's like a lighthouse in a stormy sea, standing for 'the more beautiful

world, our hearts know is possible¹ keeping the light of hope burning as more and more is lost to us. These days, our core business can only be carried out in the full knowledge of climate breakdown. Reconciliation with Earth has to sit alongside reconciliation with each other, equal in priority. Climate is an accelerant in many of the world's conflicts. It is the silent story behind so many millions of displaced lives, already creating imbalances and resource pressures that drive our divisions deeper. Even the polarizing effect of Brexit in the United Kingdom was partly caused by fears about the long march of refugees, many fleeing wars inflamed by drought and famine. Like our understanding of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are still not good at joining up the dots, at recognizing how our destruction of Earth is feeding into every scenario, lying beneath so many things that no longer behave as they used to.

In this perilous landscape, our *raison d'être* is to call people towards bridging divisions and loving Earth and to recognize the links between these two desperately urgent tasks. In the words of the Lakota elder, Tiokasin Ghosthorse, there can be no peace on Earth unless there is also peace with Earth.

Finding myself a custodian of this place with its many stories has been a journey into curating and holding liminal spaces. My predecessor, Professor Simon Keyes, conceived the Bedouin Tent as a liminal space where one could step outside the bounds of everyday life, meet people one would not normally encounter, have conversations one would not normally have. The beauty and harmony of its design, drawn from principles of sacred geometry, and the surprise of finding such a structure in the back garden of a City church, all add to its power as a place of liminality. This is about gathering ourselves in a new way – and the art of gathering people and inviting transformation means to know how to weave together an experience which bears certain things in common with a tribal community's rites of passage – the arena in which the term liminality was first applied.

One must first know how to create liminal space for oneself. As a follower of the Sufi tradition, where retreat is an important practice, I have become familiar with this process – from time to time, when the heart prompts, to separate from one's everyday life and carve out the boundaries of a space in which one can sink deeply into emptiness. I delight in the various rituals involved in taking myself out of the

¹ Charles Eisenstein, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2013).

stream of conventional thought and my own habitual patterns and creating a safe container in which the spirit can speak in ways that you cannot normally hear. Retreat often also involves weaving myself into the natural landscape and the more-than-human world, allowing the identities that hold my everyday urban persona together to fade into the background and allowing the silence of the wild to feed my soul. Afterwards, you learn how to hold the inner changes that come, gently, as you transition back into life, how to use symbols and archetypes to ground those changes inwardly so they do not evaporate under the avalanche of daily demands.

St. Ethelburga's programmes share a similar quality: a chance to come together with a diverse group of people, step out of the usual ways of thinking, grapple with both the uncomfortable truths of our time and the differences that emerge among us, immerse ourselves in new experiences, allow them to dismantle us and reshape us in a new configuration, then transition back to life, holding the seeds of something new, allowing the container of relationships, the bridges formed, to support you to plant those seeds in the world, catalyzing change, becoming the building blocks of relational, resilient communities capable of pulling together in times of crisis rather than fracturing and falling apart.

Otto Scharmer's Theory U² is an indispensable framework for this kind of group process. The shape of the letter reflects the arc of a journey, the bottom of the U depicting the 'messy middle' of this journey where often there is a dislocation, where we come up against blocks and barriers, and where there is a confrontation with not knowing. To accompany a group through any kind of transformational process means to become familiar with the bottom of the U, to model a sense of trust, holding the feelings of frustration, anguish or vulnerability, and being at ease with not knowing – in other words, how to hold the boundaries of a liminal space and enable the letting go, the dissolution of fixed patterns necessary if we are to open ourselves to something truly new.

On a global scale, humanity now sits at the bottom of the U. We are in the agony of a broken civilization, facing the possibility of an uninhabitable Earth. As is true with small groups in transition, being at the bottom of the U, *consciously*, changes things. It helps to have a roadmap – even one that is simply pointing out we are in a place where our old maps no longer make sense.

² Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2016).

In 2018 St. Ethelburga's focus shifted towards this need purposefully to face ecological breakdown. This was the year the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report painted an alarming picture of a world dangerously close to irreversible climate tipping points. Extinction Rebellion burst onto the streets of Britain bearing images of skulls, calling for mass civil disobedience; and Professor Jem Bendell published his seminal paper, "Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy."³ A taboo was smashed. Suddenly, there was permission to speak our worst fears: that it is not five to midnight, but rather five past, and some form of societal collapse is now inevitable. Initially using climate science and Bendell's paper as a framework, we began gathering people with the intention of going beyond naive optimism and deliberately looking into the abyss, asking: Do we need to prepare? And, if so, how?

What follows are some of the learnings from this work, which could also be seen as practices for living with resilience in a liminal age.

One: Face Reality

To be alive today, means to face truths and possibilities that are hard to take in. No one can know for sure what will unfold, but the bottom line is this: human extinction is a genuine possibility. It takes courage to be in relationship with that fact. To live with integrity, means to be willing to have our minds and hearts utterly crushed by that knowledge. Further, because of our tendency to revert to stasis, we have to be willing to go through the pain of that over and over again.

It is hard to do that in the midst of the collective lie that everything is going to be okay. It can also be mentally destabilizing to confront alone. We found that curating a retreat space, detached from mainstream reasoning, but also involving a container of peer relationships, can enable the tenacity to go through that shattering as a rite of passage.

To contemplate extinction means a confrontation not just with our own personal death, but with death on a much greater scale. Taking inspiration from ancient practices, from the dervishes who meditated in graveyards and mystics who dig their own graves and lie in them to contemplate impermanence, we designed retreats where this confrontation with

³. Jem Bendell, "Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy," IFLAS Occasional Paper 2, July 2018.

death was built in, and found that, rather than engendering despair or nihilism, it was empowering. As one participant said, “The monster you look in the eye, is less scary than the one you leave hiding behind the wardrobe.” Meeting personal and collective death is an initiation into living authentically in these times. It grounds us in reality and keeps us rooted there.

On our retreats, sometimes we include silent night walks, navigating dark forests together, without torches, walking into darkness as a metaphor, meeting our worst imaginings of an apocalyptic future. The first time we tried this, my mind dwelled on a memory: volunteering in Moria, a massive, overcrowded refugee camp on the Greek island of Lesbos, in the time when thousands of Syrian and Afghan refugees attempted the treacherous crossing from Turkey every day. I watched a Syrian man whose face was etched with anxiety gather his family in the middle of the night – wife, brothers, sister-in-law, five young children, frail elderly father – and prepare to head down an unlit road on the three-hour walk to the port. He had tickets for the dawn ferry to Athens. We helped him get there safely, but I have no idea what became of him and his loved ones. As we walked through the safe English countryside – knowing we had the privilege of warm beds to return to and that, in the West, the worst is yet to come – it was his face that haunted me.

Two: Trust

Living in these times means to embrace profound uncertainty, to live in an intimate, daily dance with unknowing at the deepest level. However, perhaps we can trust this process. Perhaps we can know that the disruption and darkness are necessary and have their own transformative power. The instability of the liminal state is what allows entrenched ways of being to fall away and something new to emerge. Clearly humanity could have done this differently. There was surely a turning we missed which could have led us seamlessly towards a sustainable, just and spiritually meaningful way of life. Having missed that crossroads, we can only embrace the disintegration of our civilization as an opportunity, as a teacher, and trust it will clear away space for the deeper change we need.

Rebecca Solnit, in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, describes the way disasters such as Hurricane Katrina or the Japanese Tsunami can “topple old orders and open new possibilities.” She documents how, in the aftermath of catastrophe, when societal structures have given way, new non-hierarchical

ways of relating can emerge. People create new roles for themselves, resources are shared, prejudices bypassed, and, alongside the obvious pain and shock, there is also a freedom to reinvent what community means.⁴

On an individual level, our higher selves know what it takes to break deeply embedded patterns. Sometimes a car crash or some other unforeseen “calamity” is the best means to catapult ourselves into the liminal space we need. As the caterpillar dissolves in the chrysalis before reforming as a butterfly, sometimes only radical dissolution is enough.

As Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee writes in *A Handbook for Survivalists*,⁵ we need the “unbinding power of chaos” to free us from the calcified story of consumerism, greed and exploitation that holds us in its grip. In our hubristic culture, we have not just lost the ability to welcome death, but we have forgotten the Divine has both light and dark aspects, not just Creator but also destroyer. It is not our place to judge the ways of the Divine, but rather to honour all His/Her faces. As we lean into the escalating frequency of socially and ecologically disruptive events, by bringing an attitude of trust and allowing, we are more able to align ourselves with the new ways of being waiting to emerge from the debris.

Three: Be Fluid with Identity

In the dualistic consciousness that pervades the Western world, often our sense of self is constructed through contrasts and opposites. We define ourselves by who we are not, as much as by who we are. We create “in groups” and “out groups.” What creates the heat in a conflict is often threats to our identity. External threats (such as the resource pressure created by climate, migration or economic uncertainties) can in turn strengthen group identities in ways that increase the human propensity to blame those who are “not like us.” However, at the heart of any rite of passage or any meaningful individual or collective transformation, there is the sacrifice of identity. In a tribal coming-of-age ritual, the identity of an adolescent is sacrificed in order to return to the tribe as an adult. Psychological integration or the spiritual journey can be seen as the repeated surrendering of ego-identities, all of which, whether

⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2010) (Kindle).

⁵ Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *A Handbook for Survivalists: Caring for the Earth: A Series of Meditations* (Point Reyes, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 2020).

experienced as positive or negative, are barriers to wholeness and the direct experience of the Divine. In liminal space, our identities have the potential to be more fluid. There can be breathing space around who we think we are. In a world divided by identity issues, this possibility of fluidity is very much needed.

In a landscape already painfully polarized and suffering a profound crisis of meaning, the danger of violent ideologies, authoritarianism and cultural fragmentation is great. Holding our social fabric together is as essential as changing to a carbon neutral way of life. How we understand and hold identity is a key part of that. Joanna Macy has written about the “Greening of the Self”⁶ to describe the process of expanding our identity to see ourselves as part of the wider web of the natural world. This expansion of our sense of self needs to include a recognition of how the exploitation of nature has only been made possible by the oppression of people, often along racial lines. We can no longer afford to separate these things.

Western materialism was built on colonization and the exploitation of both land and people. The wounds of that history remain deep and unhealed, and the injustice is very far from over. Whilst many Westerners wait for climate disruption to hit in a bigger way, countries like the Philippines, Malawi, Venezuela, and others in the global south are already immersed in that reality. Although this picture is changing, the countries responsible for emitting the most carbon are, for the most part, not the countries suffering its most devastating effects.

In this time of liminality, there is a need to expand our sense of identity in all directions so we can build much-needed bridges across these divides. This is often a painful process. It can mean to hold our own fears about a future of collapse together with the knowledge of our complicity in the causes of collapse elsewhere in the world. It can mean to wake up to the fact that our wealth and privilege could be built on the oppression of others. It can mean to reach outside our echo chamber and be willing to form relationships with people whose perspectives might seem abhorrent to us. It always confronts us with our own psychological shadow and the hidden shadows of our identity groups, whether they be religious, cultural, national, or political.

The dissolution of our civilization will continue to expose all these things. It will give us a choice: to retreat further into our identities and project our fears outward onto others; or to allow our sense of self to

⁶ Joanna Macy, *Greening of the Self* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2013) (Kindle).

be melted and reshaped, revealing our shared humanity as well as our connection with the more than human world. Since our resilience lies in community, specifically, robust community across differences, a more flexible relationship with identity is now an imperative.

Four: Change Your Relationship with Suffering

In his autobiography, *From a Mountain in Tibet*,⁷ Lama Yeshe describes how as a rebellious teenager he was placed in a monastery to serve his elder brother, the abbot, Akong Rinpoche. This made him miserable and resentful. It was not until the monks were forced to flee from the brutal Chinese invasion and experienced extreme cold, searing hunger and relentless fear, that he could see his suffering at the monastery had been caused by his own mind, and not by the situation itself. He recognized that, if he brought the same internal resistance to this new, truly harsh reality, it would only make things worse. What was needed was the quality of forbearance. For some privileged people, particularly in the West, we have not yet left that monastery. We may be fatigued from the Covid-19 pandemic but perhaps do not recognize that there is likely much greater suffering to come. Learning how to control our minds and endure with inner dignity the many things that will be outside our control will be a major element of our personal resilience.

Millions of people around the world are already experiencing different kinds of loss and trauma as a result of what we have done to Earth. Whether losing everything as a refugee, losing one's home in a flood or wildfire, losing one's livelihood due to lockdown, or simply feeling the deep grief of lost species – our capacity to process grief and trauma will become increasingly important in the years to come. This is already a much larger task than can be met by therapists and health workers. Our mental health may depend on tools and processes we can apply on a grand scale.

Necessary as it is for our health, more important than simply processing our grief is allowing it to change us. Grief for the world, both human and more than human, is part of the rite of passage we are journeying through. Grief has the power to open our hearts. In

⁷ Lama Yeshe Losal Rinpoche, *From a Mountain in Tibet: A Monk's Journey* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

the liminality of these times, we shall be broken open again and again and again. Our hearts will be shaped in the fire of loss. As Joanna Macy says:

We are capable of suffering **with** our world, and that is the true meaning of compassion. It enables us to recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings. Don't ever apologize for crying for the trees burning in the Amazon or over the waters polluted from mines in the Rockies. Don't apologize for the sorrow, grief, and rage you feel. It is a measure of your humanity and your maturity. It is a measure of your open heart, and as your heart breaks open there will be room for the world to heal.⁸

Five: Hold on to Your Values

The Ancient Greek word for crisis contains a reference to the action of "sifting," pointing to how calamity helps us separate what is essential from what is an irrelevant distraction. As a society, we have drifted a long way from what matters most. Just as a life-threatening medical diagnosis can help individuals to remember what is most real or meaningful in their lives, we have the opportunity collectively to reconnect with our most fundamental human values.

At St. Ethelburga's, we use embodied exercises to make future scenarios fully real to ourselves. We invite participants to identify the different stages of possible ecological and social breakdown, and to walk those trajectories, using their imagination to prepare emotionally for what could be coming down the line. If I imagine walking into a future of increasing food insecurity, mass displacement, biodiversity failure, escalating conflict, and destabilized morals and mental health, it is quite frankly terrifying. If I imagine walking through that world with the value of service alive in my heart, it is a very different feeling. Rather than a battleground for my own survival, it can become a testing ground for the spirit. Knowing and living our values can be a huge source of resilience in a time of chaos.

I once met a young man from a South American country already in the throes of both social and ecological collapse, where increasingly authoritarian leaders had seized control. His advice to the world was

⁸ Macy, *Greening of the Self*.

this: look to your values now while you still can. Know what you stand for and embed it in your mind; otherwise, before you realize what is happening, your humanity could slowly be eroded and become irretrievable. A powerful warning!

Six: Protect What Is Sacred: Silence, Spiritual Practice, Nature

Carl Jung tells the story of the rainmaker who is summoned to help to end a drought. The people are expecting to see him perform some kind of ritual magic, but instead he retires to a hut in silent contemplation for three days. His withdrawal has the effect of bringing first himself and then the land back into balance, and soon after the rains return. As we traverse the chaos and confusion of this liminal age, contemplative practice is a powerful way not just to stay stable, but also to align ourselves inwardly with the new reality trying to be born. This is not the prayer of asking for our desires to be fulfilled, but rather the deeper wordless prayer of surrender. Spiritual practice can help us detach from the hypocrisies and absurdities of late-stage capitalism and a post-truth world. Through it, we withdraw our attention from what is false, and re-root ourselves in what is real. This is not just helpful for our personal resilience but, as the rainmaker shows us, it has a wider effect. It holds a place of stillness and sanity in the world around us. It brings life back into balance.

Prayer is at its most powerful in liminal space. If we can turn our hearts towards the Divine, we can energize what is in gestation and align it with its highest potential. To do this we must stay with the humility of not knowing, refrain from jumping to solutions or limiting the outcome with our preconceived ideas or desires. It is not easy to wait in the darkness, in a place of dissolution. It is here, however, that invisible magic can happen. It is here that love can penetrate the spaces that become available when things fall apart. It is here that we can plant seeds of light to nourish our rebirth. Life will not regenerate through technology or human cleverness. It can only regenerate from the place of the sacred. Our prayers, our silence, our longing, are needed to keep the world connected with the spiritual reality that our culture of materialism and separation has done so much to destroy.

Nature is cyclical and can also teach us to be at ease in liminal space. Everywhere you look there are natural cycles that move in and out of liminality. Dawn and dusk, when the light changes from day to night

and back again. The seasons, moving through winter, when the seeds lie dormant underground, waiting for their time to stir. Our own breathing, bringing spirit to live by returning to its source. The rise and fall of civilizations, the evolution of life through crisis and extinction, these are not different, they just belong to a timescale which is harder for us to perceive.

If we do nothing else in this time, to come back into connection with the natural world and its sacred cycles is our primary need. I am always moved and inspired by the multitude of creative ways people are re-attuning to that relationship. I have learned so much and been changed forever by elders like Tiokasin Ghosthorse, Pat McCabe, Eleanor O'Hanlon, Charlotte du Cann, Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee. My own journey into that "great conversation" with the wild began to open up when six years ago I started a movement prayer that involves greeting the different kingdoms of the natural world. I love to do this outside, before I return indoors to meditate, in the borderland time as darkness turns into light, when my garden is still steeped in quiet and mystery. The combination of movement and breath and prayer for the more-than-human world opens something inside me and, after only a short time, I feel washed with peace. Over the years, I have got to know my garden in a new way, and my garden has got to know me. This brief fifteen minutes each morning, simple as it is, has helped to weave me back into the wider web of being in a way I could never have predicted. This is not just a resilience practice, but a daily reaffirmation of the inner shift Earth is calling out for us to make: back into the circle of life, where we all so deeply belong.

Seven: Keep the Fire of Vision Alive

A commitment to resilience and climate adaptation means a new relationship with vision – one that is designed for the long haul. No one who recognizes how serious the environmental catastrophe really is can be focused on their own lifetime. This is the task of many generations.

As this period of disintegration accelerates, holding a vision for regeneration that can survive through the decades until a new society can be established becomes of supreme importance. Vision is a great source of resilience. The difficulty is that the vision we need is of a "not-yet-imagined" reality. We must find a way to access a consciousness that is not reflected by the world around us. Although many people, especially young people, hold vital keys to that new way of life, there

remains a need to hold faith in something that is beyond our imagining, the way a tiny acorn holds within it the as-yet-unknown reality of a mighty oak.

Perhaps there is a kind of magic needed to tap into a felt sense of this reality that we cannot yet fully know. We can learn much from indigenous wisdom-holders, but there is something our colonized minds cannot access via the usual routes. What lies on the other side of this transition might be more different than we know. In our retreats, we developed a method of “collective dreaming” that uses shamanic journeying into the future to draw on a different quality of consciousness, one that does not separate the physical and spiritual realms. It creates an experience that bypasses the mind, enabling each participant to catch a subtle scent or taste and return holding one small seed of that future.

Those who have the capacity to dream and imagine will be needed to keep the spark of vision alive, passing it like an Olympic flame down the generations until it can bear fruit. Symbols, archetypes, and myth-making have a role here: the seeds of the fire poppy, that lie dormant for decades only to germinate in the barren conditions after a wildfire; the painted lady butterflies, tiny, fragile insects who somehow manage to migrate thousands of miles across many generations, each generation completing its portion of a bigger map; or even the tiny church of St. Ethelburga with its many stories, showing how destruction can help us re-imagine spirituality for a new era.

As I sit here writing at my desk at St. Ethelburga's, in the quiet of a Sunday afternoon, the City seems empty of human life. Sunlight bounces off the mirrored windows of the towering corporate offices and illuminates the emerald foliage in the tiny courtyard garden outside my window. I can hear the water splashing from the fountain into the pool. It seems to me that liminality is everywhere I turn my gaze. It was in the bulbs waiting silently in the dark, hidden under the ivy I cut back this morning, each one putting forth tiny roots about to begin their downward mission. It is in every doorway I pass through. It is with me on this seventh day of the week, which I try to preserve as a day of rest and emptiness. It is in my breathing, which brings my spirit into my body and returns it to merge with the beyond. It is in the way my breath links me to the furthest reaches of creation and the vast cycles of time, where whole universes burst into being, expand, contract, and disappear.

Spirit has become associated with the liminal, something we find most easily in the spaces betwixt and between. Perhaps that is only because we put Her there. We banished Her from the rational center of our lives and confined Her to the edges, exiled in the borderlands.

Perhaps it is only our perspective that makes something liminal, that decides if where we are is the center or the edge, the transition or the established order. In truth, all is woven together, the inner and outer, the beginnings and endings, the everyday and the magical. Now, when the era of duality is past its sell-by date and rapidly turning toxic, Earth is calling out to us to weave the dimensions back together again and recognize the inseparable, interpenetrating Oneness of Being. Can we as a species surrender our need to control and dominate and come back into a humble relationship with the Infinite?

The Covid-19 pandemic gave us liminal time on a global level. Full of challenge and loss, but also full of potential for change. Without the willingness to enter consciously into that space, without the guides and shamans to hold us there and help us to plumb its depths, the experience will most likely be wasted on us. However, perhaps there will be a way for us to reclaim the shaman's knowledge that lies within each of us and grow in the wisdom of the liminal. We can never return to the safety of what came before, we can only surrender deeper into chaos and change. We can only learn to trust in the face of disruption, to resist the desire to define, to control, or to solve too quickly. Certainty is safe, but can imprison us in our collective conditioning, the mindset that got us into this mess. Uncertainty is scary – but it is wild and alive and can be a liberation. We do not know whether we shall make it through, or whether we shall drive ourselves to extinction, along with all the other species who call this place home, leaving a wrecked and unlivable Earth. Perhaps like the mystics who dig their own graves and lie in them, we can use the proximity to death to bring us closer to the mystery of life. By grounding ourselves in the most painful truths of our time, we can open a portal into a new experience of love.

Creation is a glorious symphony, in which everything is being born out of emptiness, flowering and passing away. Liminality teaches us to let go. It gives us a map, a means to recognize the place of confusion as a threshold of possibility. If we can welcome liminality and learn to live intentionally within it, perhaps it can lead us into a place of greater aliveness and, ultimately, show us the way back to balance and beauty.

As I write these last lines, the light is fading outside. In the absence of traffic noise, miraculously, I hear the notes of a solitary blackbird gracing the tiny garden with lucid evening song. By the time I walk to the window, he has gone. My heart hurts. I wonder how he survives in this barren, concrete world. Soon the sun will go down and stars will come out, only the brightest visible against the lights of the City. Day will lead us into night; and we shall wait once again for the dawn.