Introduction

Timothy Carson and David McGee

Suspended between Heaven and Earth

David McGee

We love you, Bill. These were the words I pronounced as I poured the ashes of my friend, Bill Rotts, out of a tiny canvas bag. The location seemed appropriate because Bill had been at that exact spot nearly forty years earlier. The wind blew the ashes upward, into the face of my climbing partner, Todd Johnson, who was with me. The place where that wind swirled was called the Wild Stance, the last stopping point on the over-3,000-foot granite monolith called El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, California. At that moment there was nothing but air between us and the ground nearly one kilometer beneath us.

As one stands at the foot of El Cap and looks upward, before ascending, it is like peering into an endless, vertical ocean of rock. For days during the climb, the sensation is one of being lost at sea, tossed by the wind, the summit never in plain sight, and a view of the ground that never reveals your height. Objects below simply shrink. People seem like ants, cars like metallic slivers, and helicopters like flies; and, even though the Captain looms so large that it dominates every view for observers on the ground, they can barely see climbers on its face with the unaided eye.

When you cross the threshold into the space of this strange vertical world, what you have is what you need, because *it has to be*. It is survival in its most basic terms. In many instances, once climbers pass a certain point on the route, retreat is not an option; and, though

Ashes to Ashes. Photo by David McGee.

climbing requires an insane amount of physical agility and hard work, there are moments in which it seems much more like a science project, evaluating the situation and solving problems while trying to maintain your composure. It is all right to yearn for the summit but what is most important is attending to the process of getting there.

In the end, there is no conquering a rock wall. The only thing to be conquered is the ego, which is one of the primary things that can get you killed. Only a reality check provided by the enormity of the wall reveals how small, how fragile, and how limited we are. The ambiguity and chaos of the rock face has the power to help leave behind the person we thought we were even as it helps us to find the one we are meant to be. The definitions of ourselves from the horizontal world disappear and we become granite astronauts, dangling in a kind of space/time warp, dangling in a breezy cathedral of the sky.

Even sleeping on the wall can feel other-worldly. There is something mystical about waking up in the middle of the night, positioned on your porta-ledge, several thousand feet off the ground, breathing the cool, clean air, blanketed with stars and floating in space.

The disorientation that occurs on a big wall is immense. You long for the feeling of simply putting one foot in front of the other in the horizontal world. Your entire reality has been turned 90 degrees; and the best you can do is crawl upward to an ambiguous goal; but progress is hard to measure. The ground does not seem much farther away, and the summit does not seem any closer. How tall is this thing, anyway? The goal is to somehow feel at ease with uncertainty, incompletion, and not knowing yet.

What appears to be exceedingly difficult sometimes becomes easier than we thought, and what appears to be easy on your map can become nightmarish. It is misleading to say that we enjoy every moment. Pleasure is mixed with fear; and fear is healthy, fear is good. Since climbing is a sport with obvious and inherent dangers, our fear makes us vigilant.

The View from Wild Stance.
Photo by David McGee.

If you are the lead climber, for example, it often feels like casting off from the safety of an island and entering a great abyss with nothing more than a rope tied to your waist, some gear on your belt, and your hands, feet, and mental fortitude.

Much of that fear causes you to review all your safety protocols. You check and double check your belay, hauling system, knots, and back-up knots. Am I tied in properly? Have I backed up the haul bag? Does my partner have me on belay?

However, other fears relate to unpredictable chaos. What if a sudden storm strikes? What if a mass of rock decides to flake off the wall while we are climbing it? What if an earthquake hits?

During a typical climbing season, multiple parties of climbers would be on El Cap, many on the Nose, which is widely considered to be the best rock climb in the world. Many of those climbers will make the several-day slog to the top while others attempt speed ascents in less than 24 hours. In 2020, when my partner and I decided to climb the Nose of El Cap, with the pandemic in full force, there were no other climbers to be seen anywhere. The park limited capacity; and the smoke of California wildfires had recently billowed into the valley. After nearly twenty years since our last big wall together, we would return to El Cap, the sole climbers with perfect weather and visibility.

We arrived at the Wild Stance fulfilling more than one aspiration. Of course, we were crossing the wild granite sea of El Cap for ourselves. However, we were also making a pilgrimage, accompanying our friend on the last ascent, giving him back.

For us, this climb solidified a key conviction that could only be received in such an extreme environment as this: the key to climbing big things in life is to find contentment without complacency. We must find a way to be content where we are, but unafraid to endure the hardship that is required. Complacency will hold us back and allow discomfort to turn us aside from the full potential and greatest capacity to which we are called. Traversing liminal terrain requires acceptance

of ambiguity, drive for discovery, passion to dig deep, and the singular conviction that the rocky road to happiness lies far beyond what is most comfortable.

The Liminal Loop and Its Strange Power

Timothy Carson

Though very few of us will cross a threshold into the strange vertical world of a rock face, we do, nevertheless, know what it is like to be suspended in time and space, dangling between what was known and what is entirely yet-to-be-known. This reality can only be described as uncertain, ambiguous, and laden with confusion. The past coordinates of structured life seem to have melted away, as well as ubiquitous and arbitrary rules that defined the land we left. This is a dimension defined by danger as well as unusual consolations. Unexpected traveling companions and guides join us in that territory, and we discover unimaginable sea monsters that rise out of the deep.

Liminality is this in-between state of being, a strange loop in which individuals or groups find themselves in both voluntary and involuntary ways.

The loop of liminality is the transition phase within rites of passage, something explored through anthropological studies in the early twentieth century[1] and refined, expanded, and adapted by the next generation of researchers.[2] Rites of passage, especially as found in agrarian, pre-industrial tribal societies, mediated the dramatic shifts, movements, and developmental phases of the whole of society. The passages were often predetermined and utilized over and over for repeating patterns of renewal. They were also employed in great moments of unpredictable urgency and emergency.

The insights of liminality have been adapted and applied to many disciplines of study, employed in almost every context that requires a dynamic lens to interpret change and transition, as I have argued

1. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).
2. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

elsewhere.[3] This lens helps us to see phenomena freshly, describing what is already there and suggesting a way to move with the forces in play and not against them. When employed as a hermeneutical method, we peer through the liminal lens and pay close attention to context, social position, narratives and patterns, and universal images and symbols of transformation. In addition to the social sciences, liminal studies now make an important contribution to the various arenas of literature, film, art, education, spirituality, therapeutic models, and organizational change.

Moreover, this present historical moment includes vast social dislocation, collision between cultures and world views, and the simultaneous benefits and harms of technology. All of these are wrapped in an unparalleled ecological crisis. If there exists a broadly shared disorientation in our time, it may be traced to deep liminal sources, and the arts in their many forms are serving in the roles of seers and prophets. If nothing else, pandemics such as that of Covid-19 make made it abundantly clear how an extended liminal time may shape and reshape almost everything.

At our best, we are becoming mindful of the danger and potential of this liminal moment. If existence itself may be characterized as a series of liminal moments, we have become certain that we are living in at least one of them, a liminal moment of outsized intensity. Many are discovering new life-giving communities of the in-between, tribes of the transition. At the same time, we are becoming polarized by the same tribalism, as different alliances spin us ever more to opposite sides of the ring. Only wise liminal guides may assist individuals and groups in traversing such a fearsome landscape as this. These guides are already initiated into the liminal mysteries, having passed through them in one form or the other before. They have discovered the deep wisdom that is to be found within the powerful loop of transition. On those who draw from the deepest places of spirit, our many fates may hang. Like hanging on a great rock wall, we must find our contentment where we are without becoming complacent, without losing track of the pathway that appears as we climb it.

3. Timothy Carson, Rosy Fairhurst, Nigel Rooms and Lisa Withrow, *Crossing Thresholds: A Practical Theology of Liminality* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2021), pp. 67–68.