BOUNDARY-DWELLERS

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BOUNDARIES ARE ABOUT CHANGE – or the lack of it. They may be rigid or flexible. We may find them liberating or stifling. They may drive us out of our minds, or they may save our sanity.

This article attempts to explore the nature of boundary and of change, both personal and social, and to look at some of the implications for those who seem to live more acutely than others in a place of change, those, that is, who may be called 'boundary-dwellers'.

Before you read any further, take a few moments to try this experiment: reflect on your experience of one major change in your life. It does not matter what the particular change was; reflect rather on the *process* of the change and picture the shape of that process.

I have done this exercise with a number of groups, in part to illustrate that change does not happen overnight. We know that, of course, but it is extraordinary how often we forget it. We expect to be able to make even quite major changes in our lives without too much trouble and we are sometimes rather taken aback when we feel 'thrown' by change. We might give ourselves (generously, we think) three months to 'get over' some major change, and are alarmed to find it takes three years. It is all the more disturbing when we have deliberately chosen the change.

We live in a world of change. We live with changing ideas, changing moral norms, changing world politics, changing boundaries of travel in outer space, changing definitions of what it means to be alive. All this and yet we still find personal change in our own lives so difficult. We fear it and so try to avoid it; we deny the need for it. 'Better the devil we know' are often the words of our inner voice. Major changes in our lives all mean upheaval. More often than not change is something we have to face whether we like it or not: we are made redundant; a flatmate leaves to get married; we learn we have a life-threatening illness; our partner dies. These examples may seem rather dramatic, but many of the same uncomfortable feelings accompany any difficult decision. For it is rarely the case that an important decision is made in an instant – or even overnight. Rather do we engage in a *process* of decision-making, that phrase itself implying a lengthy and laborious task of deciding. Such a process is often painful and we describe ourselves as 'agonizing' over the decision. What in fact we are often describing is the state of not knowing. This is a kind of in-between time when we know a decision has to be

made, but it is not *actually* made. We are in the position of knowing what *is not* or what has been, without knowing what *is* or is to be. At such times we are tempted to decide prematurely and find ourselves in the wrong place, or the wrong job, because we cannot stand the chaos of being unable to decide. We have too many options, or not enough, or may be too fearful of letting go of what we already have. Sometimes it is because we cannot live with the voice inside saying 'I don't know, I just *don't know*'. All these may be the case, yet we still instinctively know that staying in this chaotic in-between place, *the place of boundary*, is a vital part of the process. This is where the real discernment takes place, where we have to listen to ourselves and look at our life to discover which move or which change will take us that bit closer to our own truth and its living.

The language we commonly use today about our religious faith betrays this same atmosphere of change. We are 'pilgrims' on a 'journey of faith', we live a 'life of faith' rather than assent to a set of beliefs. The journey of faith has its own moments of radical change where the overwhelming sense is one of destination unknown.

The in-between time of change may be experienced as crisis, particularly if we have been propelled into change by something beyond our control. At such times we not only need the support of our friends, family and work colleagues, but may also need counselling or some other form of professional help.

Crisis therapy has been developed by a number of people in the world of psychiatry, among them Gerald Caplan.[1] Caplan's theory is based on the concept of *emotional homeostasis*. Life is not constantly straightforward and calm for any of us; we frequently meet all kinds of hazards which upset our emotional balance. These hazards do not usually constitute any major threat to our equilibrium as we can overcome them with previously learned skills. Sometimes, however, the hazard is bigger and more complicated than we have met before, or it is one that surprises us by its sheer unfamiliarity. In such a circumstance we are thrown emotionally (and perhaps physically) off balance and experience crisis.

Caplan's crisis therapy developed with the recognition that this temporary crisis state 'of heightened susceptibility can present unparalleled opportunities for internal boundary realignment, for better or for worse'.[2] In other words, the shifting of external boundaries involved in sudden change which causes us to experience a crisis, forces the temporary loss of internal psychological boundaries. As a result of this we are faced with both the opportunity for personal growth *and* the danger of long-term psychological damage. In Caplan's words:

> A crisis is provoked when a person faces an obstacle to important life goals that is, for a time, insurmountable through the utilisation of

> customary methods of problem-solving. A period of disorganisation ensues, a period of upset, during which many different abortive attempts at solution are made. Eventually some kind of adaptation is achieved, which may or may not be in the best interests of that person and his [sic] fellows.

It is important for us to note the twin essential elements in crisis: *danger* and *opportunity*. Indeed, the Chinese symbol for crisis is formed by the pictographs for danger and opportunity. We find these two elements cropping up again and again as central characteristics in any understanding of change, whether it be personal or social change. They appear to be related to the experience of a 'gap' that must be negotiated wherever a significant boundary has to be crossed.

I was very struck some years ago listening to a Tibetan Buddhist lama describe the Great Bardo state and the function of the reading of the Book of the Dead. 'Bardo' means 'gap' and the Great Bardo is that time and place between death and rebirth. It is full of dangers and temptations which prevent a person letting go. The Book of the Dead is read as a guide, for the Great Bardo also represents the most intense opportunity for awakening. All the little bardo experiences which happen in life provide the person with opportunities to practise:

> Another important element in the Buddhist training and preparation for death is how, through contemplation as well as meditation, the individual works towards an emotional acceptance of death, and learns how to make use of the crises, upheavals and changes of life. These changes or small deaths that occur so frequently in our lives are a living link with death, prompting us to let go and revealing the possibility of seeing, in the gap they open up, the sky-like, empty, open space of the true nature of our mind. *In the transition and uncertainty of change lies the opportunity for awakening.* [italics mine][3]

The final discipline I want to mention with regard to the nature of boundary and change is that of social anthropology, and particularly the work of Victor and Edith Turner. The Turners are noted for their taking up and developing of Arnold van Gennep's concept of liminality (from the Latin *limen*, threshold). Van Gennep's primary interest was in rites of passage, those rituals which accompany any change in social status. His best known work is his study of male initiation rites at or around puberty.[4]

Van Gennep distinguished three phases in an initiation rite which he called the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal rites or phases within a single rite. They correspond to the rites of separation, margin and

aggregation (reincorporation into the social body). Their function is to enable individuals and the social group to make the transition from (in this case) childhood to adulthood. Such rituals acknowledge the 'problem' of change for all concerned: the individual must take on and adjust to a new social status; the social group must adapt to its new shape.

For the purposes of this article, the interesting feature of rites of passage is the nature of the liminal phase. Van Gennep's study is based on the assumption that human societies have structures and hierarchies and that all of us have a position, or positions, within that structure. To describe someone as 'liminal' is to say that they are between the structures of society. For example, in an initiation rite it is that time between the leaving of childhood and the arrival at adulthood. During this time the liminal person is without formal status; he or she has been temporarily removed from the normal structure of society. They are a no-person in a no-place. The position of the liminal person is full of ambiguity: we do not know what to make of such people nor how to relate to them. They convey both a mystique and a threat; they are sacred and dangerous.

The Turners' work has focused on the liminal and the nature of liminality. They have written about the early Franciscan movement as an attempt at 'institutionalized liminality'[5] and about medieval pilgrimage as a liminal (or liminoid, to use their term) phenomenon.[6] They have described the way in which liminal individuals and communities are inter-structural and how they are characterized by *communitas*, that is, close-knit, spontaneous, non-hierarchical community.

Following from Victor Turner's work in *The ritual process*, some writers have used the concept of liminality to analyse the nature and function of religious communities. One such writer is Richard Endress writing in the *American Benedictine Review* (volume 26, June 1975).

Endress focuses on the aspect of liminality which is to do with separation from normal society. He defines liminality 'as an ambiguous, sacred, social state in which a person or group of persons is separated for a time from the normal structure of society' (p 142). He goes on to describe the different ways in which all human societies are structured and then offers two examples of liminal persons. The first is that of initiands in a rite of passage; the second is the example of persons who voluntarily separate themselves from society. This may be, for example, to prepare themselves for a major change in their lives. So he cites Jesus, the Buddha, Mohammed and others, who begin their public ministries by first withdrawing. He also gives as examples those individuals or groups who withdraw from society to emphasize their opposition to its

values, politics and so on. Such groups tend to proliferate at times of rapid social change and upheaval.

With this definition of liminality, which emphasizes separation from society, it is not surprising that Endress views the monastic community as *the* example of a permanent liminal life-style, that is, a life of boundary-dwelling.

Liminal persons or groups have two important social functions. The first has to do with clarifying the basic structures of a society by highlighting the rearrangements of these structures which occur when change takes place. The second function has to do with the way in which liminal persons or groups bring about social change. Major social changes often begin when a small group sets itself apart and in opposition to the prevailing society; the wider society then slowly takes on the new values of the original protest group.

Endress sees monasticism as traditionally fulfilling both these functions for the Church, again emphasizing the apartness or separation of the monastic community. He sees the way in which they bring about change as the holding up of an ideal. In so doing he seems (however unconsciously) to be using social anthropology to reassert the traditional view of the superiority of the monastic life. He writes:

> In seeking his own salvation the monk provides a model which the average Catholic may look up to and try to emulate, and the monastic community collectively provides a model of that ideal Christian community towards which the Church is presumably moving. All of this, I presume, is what is meant, at least partially, when monks speak about the prophetic role of their vocation. (pp 149–50)

I would like at this point to introduce another example of a liminal community. The image of the women's camp at Greenham Common is a powerful and illuminating one when it comes to reflecting on the nature of boundary.

A military base guarding weapons of mass destruction. High security, guards, guns, blinding lights, razor wire. An ordinary Berkshire road, grey, windy, narrow in places. Houses: small, medium, large; bricks, curtains, warm lights, family homes.

The razor wire and the road provide a boundary not always easy to cross: they define the base and 'normal society'. Between them a verge: grass, bushes, mud, plastic sheeting, wood fires, women.

The women at Greenham Common are boundary-dwellers: they provide a visual, as well as sociological, example of what it means to be *between* the structures of society; they are, in other words, liminal persons.

The verge on which they camp represents the threshold between the military base and 'normal' civilian society. The women belong to neither and yet to both. They have been a constant threat to order because they regularly cross boundaries and confuse.

Their power (which is undeniable) stems essentially from their position both physical and social. They dwell in a no-place (here, literally a no man's land); they have no formal status. They attract the strong ambivalent feelings directed at liminal persons: they are regarded with awe as special; they are reviled as dirty and mad.

In this example the liminal persons are again instigators of change, not only because they hold an ideal, but because they challenge, cross and reshape boundaries. In a sense what they are about is the *denial of separation* or the refusal to allow the separation off from society and its human values of a military base where those values seemed suspended by the presence of weapons of mass destruction.

The women of the Greenham peace camp separate themselves from 'normal society' for varying lengths of time, leaving family, jobs and homes for the time they spend in the camp. But their liminality has to do with their in-betweenness, and their living on a literal boundary, rather than their separateness.

The third picture of liminality I want to offer is from the Bible. The story of the Exodus is a story of a people in transition. The Israelites leave Egypt, the place of oppression and captivity, and set out for the Promised Land, the place of freedom and prosperity. But they do not arrive in an instant; it is a very long journey, characterized by both opportunity and danger. The wilderness represents an extended threshold: the gap that must be crossed to move from what has been to what shall be. It becomes the place of encounter with God *and* the place of temptation.

The same is true of the wilderness as experienced by Jesus after his baptism.

> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. (Mark 1:12–13)

Endress referred to Jesus' time in the wilderness as an example of separation in preparation for ministry. I would like, however, to suggest that separation is not the key to understanding this experience, but rather it is primarily an experience of transition. Jesus is here in a liminal position not because he is separate from the rest of society, but because he is *between* one state (a relatively stable and ordinary family existence)

and another (his ministry as the Human One[7]). For Jesus, as for all of us, change does not happen overnight; it is a process, often with distinct phases. Jesus' baptism marks the end of his settled life; his arrival in Galilee marks the start of his new life; the wilderness represents the gap between, the place of *transition*, the *limen*.

Endress' description of monasticism as a liminal life-style highlights the feature of *separation*. The image of the women at Greenham Common reminds us that the liminal community is not only separated *from* normal social structures but is found *between* the structures of society and characteristically gathers and dwells on boundaries.

Finally, the images of the wilderness of the Exodus and of Jesus' place of temptation indicate the central theme of transition. The liminal is not only between one place and another; but also between one time and another. It represents the extended moment of change.

To explain further what I mean by 'the extended moment of change' I would refer to the current state of Eastern Europe. Here, I believe, is a frightening example of what constitutes the process of change. The old order has died but the new has not yet developed to take its place. The people of Eastern Europe are living in the time between what has been and what is yet to be. There is so much potential and opportunity and so much chaos and danger.

Who, then, are today's boundary-dwellers in relation to the Church and to Christianity? In other words, who are the liminal persons or groups of persons who are likely to be the instigators of change?

I suggest that they are those who are in transition and whose experience tends to be characterized by a sense of being neither here nor there, yet both here *and* there. They are also people who very often feel powerless and would regard themselves as perhaps least likely to bring about important change.

I spend a lot of time with people (mostly women) who are either struggling to stay in the institutional church or struggling to leave it. They may also be in the same position as regards Christianity generally. They may well be members of networks or groups who make use of wilderness imagery in their liturgies and who may liken their experience to the Exodus. (See for example the Southwark Wilderness Liturgy in Janet Morley and Hannah Ward (eds), *Celebrating women*, or the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement's 'Service of Passover and Exodus' on leaving St Botolph's Church after losing a court case to expel them from their office there.)

In using such imagery these groups and individuals are finding meaning in myths and symbols of transition. What they have moved

away from is not always clear, but there is usually a sense that something has died on them: they no longer feel at home in their parish churches, worship that used to be nourishing leaves them feeling alienated and starved. Neither is there a clear sense of where they are going.

I do not want to suggest that the experience is negative for everyone; it is not. There are those who feel challenged and excited by new-found freedoms to explore different spiritualities, or who feel stimulated by the political struggle to bring about change in the church to which they half belong.

So why is the experience freeing and creative for some, whilst solely painful and seemingly rather disintegrative for others? Obviously, there are many reasons, but I suggest that a significant factor is the prevalent view of boundary as something we are *either* one side of *or* the other. We are either in or out. Most institutions have an interest (to put it mildly) in wanting to clarify who belongs and who does not. This is often emphasized when there is any kind of 'inner circle' – the people who are *really* in. So the gender or (public) sexual orientation of the clergy is more important than that of a lay person. Different rules apply as to who can be 'in' and who cannot. (See, for example, the Church of England Bishops' recent statement on sexuality with respect to homosexuality.)[8]

If we see our church's boundary as relatively clear-cut – or even like a piece of elastic that you can stretch until it snaps – we put ourselves (or allow ourselves to be put) in the position of having to 'stay in' or 'leave'. We live with an almost intolerable tension. But I hope I have shown that boundaries are not like that. Rather is there a whole space *between* one place and another, that is characterized by the danger of disintegration *and* the potential or opportunity for creativity and growth.

This is an important area for us to explore because in our contemporary world we need to offer a spirituality or spiritualities of change which embrace change rather than protect us from it. The alternative is a retreat into sectarianism or fundamentalism, both points of arrival (often premature arrival) rather than transition.

The great gift of boundary-dwellers is that they are instigators of change and renewal. But what are their needs? What can help an experience of boundary-dwelling, or liminality, be creative rather than destructive?

Part of the answer lies in understanding something about the nature of boundaries and processes of change. The 'maps' supplied by psychologists, anthropologists and others give us some clues, in particular the existence of a 'gap' at the heart of a boundary, the twin elements of opportunity and danger present within such a gap, and the ambivalent

feelings which accompany them. I would like to conclude, however, by returning to the question of monasticism as a liminal life-style.

Is the monastic person liminal because he or she is living a life *separated* from 'normal society'? 'The monk', says Endress, traditionally 'wavers, so to speak, between two worlds – the world of the sacred and the world of the profane – without being a part of either' (p 148). Yet in a rite of passage the liminal person is neither one thing nor another *and* both; that is liminality's central ambiguity. Boundaries separate one thing from another *and* they provide the meeting place for both. A contemplative life, wherever and however it is lived, surely proclaims the *meeting* of heaven and earth, the sacred and the profane, and in so doing denies that they are separate.

To live in a focused way on that particular boundary needs the enclosure of the monastery (or, in the case of another contemplative life-style, the artist's studio) not primarily to be separated but to be *contained.* In order to live sanely on one boundary, or set of boundaries, we need other boundaries: family, community, buildings, timetables – all these provide us with boundaries that contain. 'It has become clear to us that liminality is not only *transition* but also *potentiality*' (Victor and Edith Turner, 1978). Rather than separation, a monastic life-style may have much to say to us about the relationship between potentiality and limitation; or to put it another way, between openness and boundedness. When he wrote his article in 1975 Richard Endress saw a rather bleak future for monastic life because the separation he regards as necessary for its liminal quality is so hard to retain in the modern world. If, however, containment rather than separation enables its liminal possibility, there may well be a whole new range of questions and possibilities for monastic renewal – not to mention its relevance for all those who find they live precariously (but creatively) on or between boundaries.

NOTES

[1] G. Caplan, *An approach to community mental health* and *Principles of preventative psychiatry* (both London, Tavistock, 1964).

[2] Michael Hobbs in an excellent article reviewing work on crisis theory, 'Crisis intervention in theory and practice: a selective review' in *British Journal of Medical Psychiatry* 57 (1984), pp 23–34.

[3] Sogyal Rinpoche, 'The survival of consciousness: a Tibetan Buddhist perspective'. As far as I know this is an unpublished paper.

[4] Arnold van Gennep, *The rites of passage,* trans M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee (RKP, 1960).

[5] Victor Turner, *The ritual process* (Penguin, 1969).

[6] Victor and Edith Turner, *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture* (Basil Blackwell, 1978).

[7] I do not know whether the title 'the Human One' originated with her, but I am indebted to Carter Heyward for introducing it to me.

[8] *Issues in human sexuality* (Church House Publishing, 1991).