

# MEMENDICANT

## A Liminal Time

RICHARD ROHR, OFM

*imen* is the Latin noun for threshold, which can also be translated as brow, edge, portal, or gateway. In all cases, the connotation is that we are leaving one thing, state, or place and about to enter something entirely different or new. We are betwixt and between when we are in liminal space, and undergo a unique kind of waiting before the new space is entered. If we do not enter a threshold, not much new is going to happen on the other side. But we must not force our way through liminal space until we learn what it has to teach us. (Hear this, technological society!)

For archaic and Native religions, it took the form of journey, walkabout, or pilgrimage; for Hindus, entering the temple with devotion; for Christians, extended hermitage or retreat, Advent, and Lent; for Muslims, Ramadan; for Buddhists, walking with a begging bowl; and for Jewish people, Passover. *Always there had to be a leaving and a learning or there would be no finding.*

When we at the Center for Action and Contemplation created the Men's Rites of Passage (MROP) back in the early to mid-1990s,<sup>1</sup> I learned from those who teach ritual process<sup>2</sup> that the key to effective

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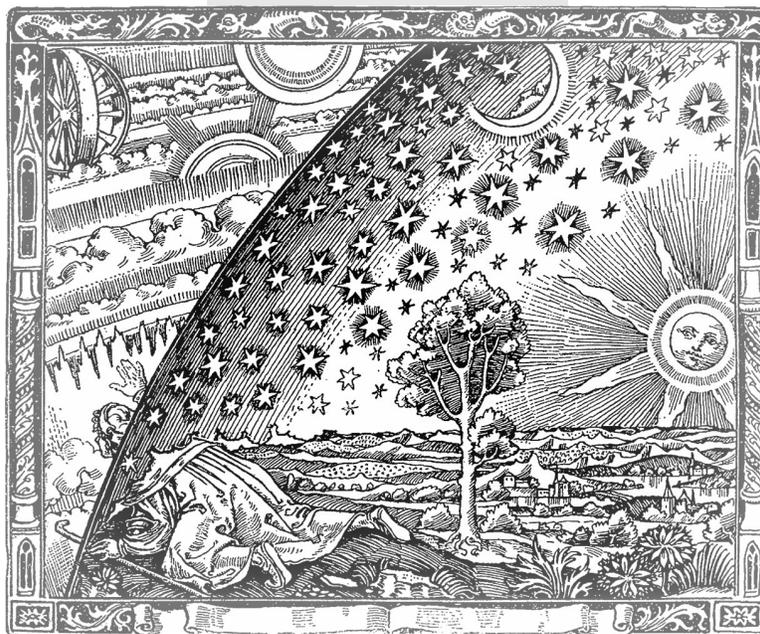
and transformative ritual is to first create honest symbols, then invite the initiate to a very concrete crossing over, and seemingly insist that people enter such a space both psychologically and physically. This is often offensive to the well-padded modern male psyche. But it could never just be done in the head, or by a lecture, or through reading about it—although many tried. There has to be a physical or participatory ritual experience, hence the phrase *rites of passage*. It was always a combination of intense individual and communal experience.

This ideally should have been the foundation for our historical understanding of a Sacrament, or even a minor sacramental experience. But that well-padded Western Catholic ego prettified all seven of its Sacraments and seemed much more concerned about the presence of the proper minister (in all seven cases) than the transformation

of the initiate. This is one of my saddest complaints about the Roman Church (and other churches too). Most of my fifty years of giving retreats was, in effect, a feeble attempt to correct this major imbalance.

A good layperson's description of an effective Sacrament or sacramental rite (the

[continued on page 5]



It will surely take the rest of our lives to recognize what is happening in this time.

# A Liminal Place

KIRSTEN OATES

We are taught that God is both infinite, unknowable, and a mystery, and also revealed in the concrete reality of our daily lives. I want to share an event from my life where I felt God's presence through my experience.

My sister, who lives in the Philippines, was due to have her fourth child in April of 2019. In February, I got an urgent call from my brother-in-law, telling me that my sister had been taken to hospital with a ruptured umbilical cord. Her new baby girl had been delivered and was in the neonatal intensive care unit.

I got on the first flight I could find—a direct, sixteen-hour flight from San Francisco to Manila—so I could be there to help the family. About seven hours into the flight one of the plane engines started having problems. I was awakened suddenly when the plane began to shake violently.

I have flown a great deal in my life and I am quite used to turbulence, but this was something very different. The plane was shaking and bouncing so much that I had to grip the armrests of my seat to stop myself from bouncing right out of it. Internally, I was panicking and becoming overwhelmed. My hearing started to fade, my vision was getting blurry, and I was dizzy. I realized that I needed to accept that I was going to die. The faces of my family began to surface in my mind, and I felt like I was saying goodbye to them. I began to cry.

Somehow, in the midst of my tears, I began to focus on how to stay present to myself. I managed to slow my breathing down a little and began talking to myself: "It's okay, you're okay, it's okay, you're okay." This evolved into a kind of chant that had a calming effect on me. Externally, I was still violently shaking and bouncing, but internally I was finding peace.

Suddenly, my experience completely changed. I was no longer in my seat on the plane. I found myself in a kind of illuminated darkness, without any boundaries. I experienced myself being held in place by this very fine, sticky film. It was incredibly still and yet very alive. It was silent and yet I felt acknowledged. It felt safe, but mysterious. As I became more oriented to this place, I had this deep sense of knowing that on one side of the fine, sticky film was life and on the other side was death. Although I knew both life and death were present around me, I couldn't tell which was which, and I knew deeply that it didn't matter. From my position, it all felt completely trustworthy.

I cannot tell you how long I was in this place, but eventually I came back to being in my seat on the plane. The violent shaking had stopped. The pilots had regained control of the plane. My body was not really okay, but I made an internal commitment to try and stay calm. I'm not going to lie—it felt like forever until we landed.

Fortunately, the flight home went well, though my body was a bit tense. The day after I returned, I shared with my husband what had happened to me. I said to him, "I feel, in a way I cannot explain, whether I was here or on the other side, it would be just the same for me." In my whole being, I felt those words were true, and I still feel that certainty today.

*This article is an excerpt from Kirsten Oates' article "A Liminal Place" in the Spring 2020 edition of the CAC's literary journal, Oneing.*

KIRSTEN OATES is the Center for Action and Contemplation's Managing Director of Programs and Design, and is an alumna of the Center for Action and Contemplation's Living School.



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# A Reflection

JAMES FINLEY

CAC is deeply blessed that faculty member James Finley shares his many gifts with our students, staff, and faithful followers. Recently, James lost his beloved wife and partner, Maureen, and we grieve in solidarity with him. Together they shared a love of the mystics and sought the spiritual depths of love. Both clinical psychologists, they counseled patients in adjacent offices for thirty years. The following words are from the introduction to Jim's forthcoming book on the spirituality of healing.

I am sitting here with my beloved wife, Maureen, as she lies beside me, dying in the final stages of Alzheimer's disease. I am grateful for the in-house hospice program that provided the hospital bed in which Maureen is now lying unconscious.

Even though she is unconscious and cannot open her eyes to look at me, I believe she can hear me as I speak to her from my heart in whispered words. I just now told her that the waves of unbearable pain and crying that, from time to time, overtake me—from being unable to imagine living without her—seem to soften at least a little as I am learning to be more accepting of the immensity and mystery of her death that has, from the beginning, been woven into the immensity and mystery of our years together.

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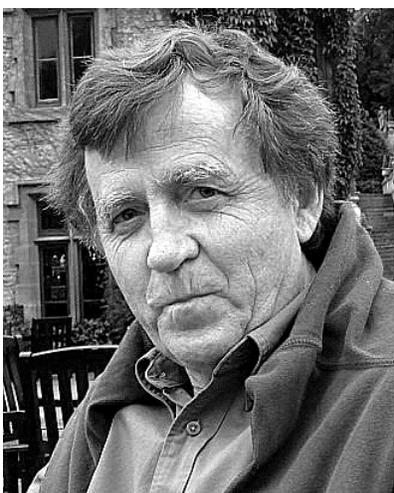
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The slowness with which she is gently fading away from me seems to be continuous with the slowness with which the sun is setting out over the ocean just beyond this darkening room where Maureen and I have lived and shared so much over the past thirty years.

I just told her that my suffering is eased in sensing that her soul has already begun to pass over into God, leaving but a long vapor trail of itself in which she is still

but barely tethered to her body in her breathing. I suppose this is why deep meditation practice so often seeks to ground us in our breathing as the gate of heaven.



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Over the years, Maureen and I would share insights that came to us in our mornings, sitting here together in what we called monastic silence. From time to time, she would share a passage in one of her favorite writings, perhaps the chapter in Thomas Merton's *Disputed Questions* titled "Philosophy of Solitude" or that lucid little commentary by Cyprian Smith on Meister Eckhart, *The Way of Paradox*. I would share a passage from the text of a mystic in which I was immersed at the time. Then we would return to our shared silent reading. Such a sweet and subtle way to be so unexplainably one with each other in the presence of God. I suppose that I am sitting here now, saying these things to her, knowing in my heart that she is present to me here, listening from a depth of presence that I can but scarcely imagine.

JAMES FINLEY, PhD, is a contemplative teacher, author, retreat leader, and retired clinical psychologist. Early in his life, James lived as a cloistered monk at the Trappist monastery of the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, where the world-renowned monk and author Thomas Merton was his spiritual director. He is the author of *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, *The Contemplative Heart*, and *Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*. To learn more about James Finley, please visit [jamesfinley.org](http://jamesfinley.org).

# A Legacy of Generosity

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*We at the Center for Action and Contemplation wish to honor our friend and supporter Betty Lou Lanius (1924-2019), who remembered CAC and Fr. Richard Rohr through her very generous bequest.*



Betty Lou Lanius was born in Waukegan, Illinois, where she became a biochemist at Abbott Laboratories and an influential member of their scientific team. Betty moved to the Gulf Shores area of Alabama from Libertyville, Illinois, ten years ago to enjoy the warm weather and walks on the beach. A remarkable, adventurous, loving, and generous person, her deep faith in God's love was a great source and hope for her, and because of this she had a way of making others' lives better. Betty was a devoted supporter and patron of the Center for Action and Contemplation.

Through her generosity, Betty Lou Lanius has contributed to the financial freedom that allows Fr. Richard and our other CAC faculty and staff to offer their transformative wisdom to the world.

*To learn how you can remember CAC in your will, please contact Ben Keeseey at [BKeeseey@cac.org](mailto:BKeeseey@cac.org). For more information, visit [cac.org/support-cac](http://cac.org/support-cac)*

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## Voices from Our Community on the Front Lines of the COVID-19 Pandemic

I serve as a nurse in Nashville... in an ICU for patients suffering from COVID-19. I often listen to parts of the podcasts on my way to and from the hospital. I listened to Father's prayers in the most recent bonus episodes as I climbed the stairs to our unit. I stopped in the stairwell and felt... moved to tears as he said, "We don't know." In this time, the anxiety around the unknown has revealed a secondary pandemic of fear, uncertainty, insecurity over a pathogen that we can't see, touch, or smell. We can't name our fear because we don't know exactly what we are afraid of. Ultimately, it is death and loss, I suppose. Your prayers have deeply helped me. —Neil S.

*Prayers have deeply helped me.*

I am a clinical chaplain working in a hospital. Considering the unprecedented circumstances people working in healthcare are faced with... we aim to find new and adaptive ways in which to minister to staff, now more than ever. My director and I are both receiving the daily meditations and benefitting from them in our daily prayers. The very first meditation offered a beautiful prayer that I... posted in key areas so that hospital staff might see it.... Thanks to Fr. Rohr and his collaborators for... helping us remember that all that we do flows from our deep connection with our Heavenly Father and all beings. —Marta O.

As I sit here in the early hours of the morning, with "reason" to be afraid, I am blessed with my mantra for today: I am alive, I have this moment, and it is good. —Pat B.

*All that we do flows from our deep connection*

*CAC offers a deep bow of gratitude to all offering committed service during this challenging time.*

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# A Liminal Time

[continued from page 1]

difference largely having to do with scale) is *whenever an outward sign, place, or object comes to symbolize, and thus validate, an actual inner spiritual experience*. It is all based on a very solid Christian understanding of *incarnation*—that spiritual things need physical counterparts to convey their message. If it is a well-matched sacramental moment or symbol, it will naturally lead us into liminal space, which is always transformative on some levels of body, mind, soul, and/or spirit.

If it doesn't, we must be honest and admit that it is merely magical thinking, similar to an amulet to protect us from the bad, a good-luck charm, or a talisman to increase our power. Most "sacramental" symbols became exactly that. Think of medals, crosses, very often statues, even holy water itself. Each of these can have a very proper signification, but it depends on the degree of the "initiation" of the practitioner. It is never, and must not become, magic or we regress.

Sometimes, the realization matches the ritual moment, but my experience, after all these years of celebrating the Sacraments in a secular culture like ours, is that for those who have already come to deeply desire or partially experience the grace, the Sacrament solidifies and celebrates the already existing process. It is real and good. Isn't it interesting that Catholics, and other Christians, use the term "celebrate" to describe Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Matrimony, although less so with the Anointing of the Sick and Holy Orders.

Note that *celebrate* is not the language of signing a contract or a juridical agreement, although we often acted as if it were. (Many still speak of "administering" the Sacraments, which is not totally off.) I would love to know the history of the use of the word *celebrate* in the sacramental imagination. The one who taught many of us the *full* history of the Sacraments back in the 1960s and 1970s, Dr. Joseph Martos, died last month in Louisville on the feast of the Annunciation, of long-standing leukemia. He held a couple of doctorates and was smarter than I, but Joe would attend our masses at the New Jerusalem Community in Cincinnati with such quiet fervor, and would come to me for occasional confessions with the earnestness of a young child. He really believed in what he taught. Sacraments were doors to the sacred for him, but not in any kind of "Open Sesame" way!

Joe wrote a book that was used in many seminaries before the re-entrenchment of the 1990s and 2000s: *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (an honest history of the seven Catholic Sacraments as of 1965). He wrote another in 2017, which

says it all: *Honest Rituals, Honest Sacraments: Letting Go of Doctrines and Celebrating What's Real*—and of course he could not get it published by a mainline Catholic publisher. He was humble enough to advise me on my very first books in the 1980s (*The Wild Man's Journey: Reflections on Male Spirituality* and *The Great Themes of Scripture*). He, a scholar, gave me lots of credibility when I had none!

I say all of this here to emphasize that true liminal space is always a threat to the status quo. It is subversive to all forms of Churchianity and repetitive ceremony. Creating an offbeat ritual for forgiveness down by the Jordan riverside was an absolute affront to the temple establishment, yet John the Baptist, a son (on both sides) of the priestly class, did exactly that and none of us would think of this as a drowning/death ritual today (see Romans 6:4–6). We totally prettified it and made it age *inappropriate* once we began to align with empire in 313 CE. It lost its power to change most people. There was no entrance into liminal space for babies.

*We are in a Reality-created liminal space now, a huge one, surpassing all the usual boundaries.* We call it the coronavirus pandemic and it has rearranged the world overnight. It will surely take the rest of our lives to recognize what is happening in this time, as we are thrown unwittingly into a place that we would rather not go. Now we have no choice but to submit and learn whatever good lessons are to be learned. There are seemingly very many.

We are in a global initiation rite. We have no idea how long it will last. Surely our recent political history, church scandals, economic obsessions, and earth destruction were telling us how deeply we need to start with some very fresh beginnings to get beyond the dualistic and partisan divides that are still destroying our sacred home at all levels. Nothing less than a pandemic could begin to re-educate such a cold, divided world, where the sacred has been almost entirely lost. We needed a new "doorway" and we are being pushed through it.

*Peace and all good,*



Richard Rohr

1 Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation* (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

2 Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 1969) and Joseph Chilton Pearce, *Spiritual Initiation and the Breakthrough of Consciousness: The Bond of Power* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1981).

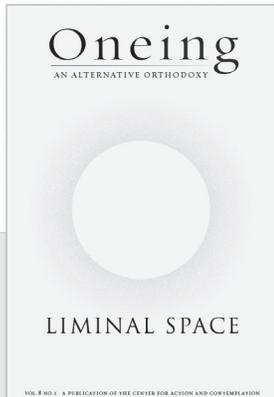
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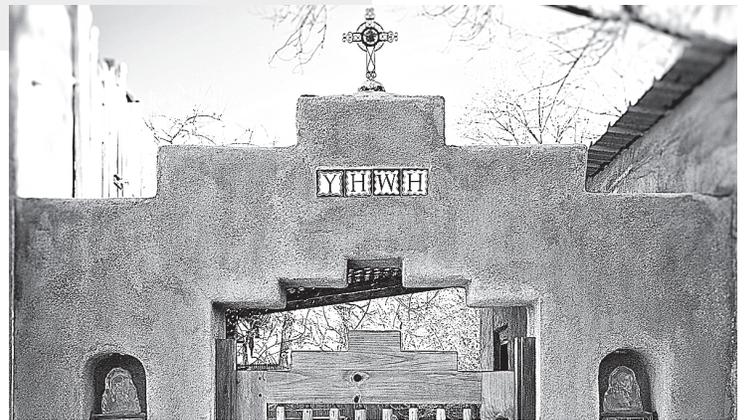
“In liminal space, we must leave  
business as usual . . . and voluntarily  
enter a world where the rules and  
expectations are quite different.”

—Richard Rohr

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