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SACRED SECLUSION: FORMATION THROUGH LIMINALITY AND HOSPITALITY IN THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CLASSROOM

Abstract:

Though precarious and uncomfortable, the liminal experience of suspension between places, experiences, or identities postures one to see and understand the world in fresh and deeply enriching ways. This paper proposes that the religious education classroom offers a liminal space in which distance from a society dominated by white normativity may be cultivated to create opportunity for hospitality and embrace of the marginalized ‘other.’ The classroom as a liminal environment invites students and educators to deliberately step away from a societal context in which white westerners act almost exclusively as the ‘host’ on whose terms dialogue is conducted and resources are distributed. In entering into the liminal classroom, white students and educators commit to adopt the role of ‘guest,’ submitting to non-white students, educators, and educational resources as specially-qualified ‘hosts.’

Sacred Seclusion

The term liminality has been defined as, “A transitory and precarious phase between stable states, which is marked off by conceptual, spatial and/or temporal barriers, within which individuals, groups and/or objects are set apart from society and/or the everyday.”¹ One example of liminal experience can be found in the initiation rites of the Kenyan Kalenjin tribe. For the Kalenjin people, the transition from boyhood to manhood is traditionally marked by a period of seclusion from the community, during which time the young men are instructed in the traditions of the tribe and the essential lessons of Kalenjin manhood. At the conclusion of this period of seclusion and initiation, those who withdrew from the community as boys return to their people as men, having been transformed, prepared, and equipped to fulfill their new role in the community.

¹ Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen and Joshua Edelman, “Liminality,” *Ecumenica* 7, no. 1–2 (2014): 1.

This paper seeks to demonstrate how the religious education classroom provides a liminal space in which distance from a society dominated by white normativity can be cultivated through the practice of hospitality. In a world dominated by polarizing politics and hateful hegemony, religious educators and institutions are uniquely poised to foster new and creatively engaged responses to ‘otherness’ in the sacred liminality of the classroom, and to equip students with the tools needed to implement these approaches in their own personal and professional contexts. Such a task must begin with a hearty acknowledgement of the dangers and deep inadequacies of any educational model tailored to suit the needs and perspectives of white westerners as ‘normative’ at great expense to those who fall beyond that narrow field of normativity. Further, new educational models and approaches must be anchored firmly in conviction of the utter necessity of diverse and multifaceted perspectives for educational integrity and honest pursuit of truth.

With these fundamental acknowledgements in mind, this paper proposes implementing practices of hospitality in the liminal environment of religious education classrooms as a means of combating white normativity and fostering mutually empowering cross-cultural and interethnic relationship. The inherent liminality of the classroom offers opportunity to invite students and educators alike to leave behind their stable cultural contexts in which white westerners act almost exclusively as the normative ‘host’— the party on whose terms dialogue is conducted and resources are distributed. In entering into the more precarious space of the liminal classroom physically, socially, and spiritually, white students and educators commit to adopt the role of ‘guest,’ submitting to non-white and non-western students, educators, and educational resources as particularly valuable and specially-qualified hosts. The deliberate reversal of guest and host roles serves to quiet the cacophony of white hegemony, and to amplify the voices of historically marginalized people. Additionally, the centering of diverse and non-white experiences empowers those individuals who are systematically disenfranchised in western society and equips students of privilege to return to their communities beyond the classroom with greater cultural competency, empathy, and resources for advocacy.

Liminality

When considering creating brave spaces amidst conflict and crisis spurred by systemic racism, discrimination, and xenophobia, liminality isn’t the first thing that comes to mind. Liminality has been defined as “neither here nor there...betwixt and between the positions assigned...”² It is quite easy to disregard it and simply view it as another descriptive word. However, quick research on liminality proves that it is significant and relevant to topics such as identity, ritual process, education, and transformation among many others. This section will discuss the history and usage of liminality and the three-fold stages found in liminality.

History and Usage of Liminality

Arnold Van Gennep, a French Anthropologist, who was studying anthropology of ritual, coined the word “liminality” in 1908; he used it to describe rites of passage. Later in 1964, Victor Turner, a British anthropologist, popularized it through his work that also dealt with rites

² Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969), 94-95.

of passage. These two anthropologists established that liminality was the second of three stages in the rite of passage ritual. The first stage was separation while the third stage was *communitas*. Separation signified dispersion from a group; individuals detach from the community and enter into the liminal stage. The liminal stage is ambiguous; individuals in this stage portray behaviors that are submissive or humble. *Communitas* is the reincorporation into the community that one had detached from.

Turner based his research on rituals, particularly rites of passage, in African societies. These societies were at the time considered uncivilized and barbaric, and the people were viewed as savages. As time progressed, Turner became more interested in placing liminality within modernity. He “became interested in what happened to the liminal in modern societies where social structures were not so clearly established that they could be discarded and remade, even through ritual.”³ This led him to study performance studies in collaboration with Richard Schechner, a theatre director and theorist. Turner studied performers whose identity was continuously betwixt their own identity and the identity they took. This study and collaboration seems to be the beginning of scholars from other disciplines applying the usage of liminality.⁴

Following the collaborative research in performance studies, the study of liminality began gaining ground in various other fields including the field of theology. Trebilcock, who has studied “theology in context liminality,” argues “liminality theory has a particular application to theological discourse because of the close association of ritual to theology in traditional formulations of the tradition...”⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to empirically search for theological knowledge in liminality. Franciscan friar Father Richard Rohr applied this concept to theology by describing the liminal space as “the prophetic position,” a sacred place on the spiritual edge of the inside. This sacred place is not marked by “an outsider throwing rocks or a comfortable insider who defends the status quo, but one who lives precariously with two perspectives held tightly together.”⁶

There is indication that when liminality was first coined by Van Gennep and later popularized by Turner, it was used to describe a stage or phase in a ritual. As its application crosses over to different disciplines, it is used to describe a place either in one’s life or a physical space. Therefore, individuals describing themselves as third culture kids or immigrants who have lived in more than one place can refer to themselves as Liminals. This means that they often live in the juxtaposition of feeling as though they do not fit in any culture that they have lived in, yet at the same time, fitting in. They constantly live in cultural tension where they often have to think about and adjust particular cultural values, traditions, and norms to fit the cultural context they find themselves. This could be as simple as an immigrant child speaking with one accent, dialect or language while at home and changing to another while at school or when with friends.

On the other hand, a liminal space can be used to describe a position in one’s life. Rohr says liminal spaces are “when we are betwixt and between, have left one room but not yet entered the next room, any hiatus between stages of life, stages of faith, jobs, loves, or

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michelle Trebilcock, “*Theology in Context: Liminality*,” *Colloquium* 48, no. 1 (May 2016): 74–86.

⁶ Richard Rohr, “*On the Edge of the Inside: The Prophetic Position*,” *Tikkun* (October 9, 2007): 1.

relationships. It is that graced time when we are not certain or in control, when something genuinely new can happen..."⁷ Liminal spaces can also refer to physical places that people occupy. This could be a house, church, or prayer room just to name some. In the rites of passage that Van Gennep and Turner studied, the individuals were not only in a liminal phase but in a physical liminal space as well. The rite of passage took place in an actual space. They entered that space with one identity and left with another; transformation occurred. Rohr proposes that "...much of the work of the biblical God and human destiny itself is to get people into liminal space and to keep them there long enough to learn something essential and genuinely new. It is the ultimate teachable space."⁸ In this paper, liminality is discussed as a physical space, more specifically, the classroom space. The repeated and ritualistic entering of this physical liminal space week by week may be tailored to draw students into an experience of social and cultural liminality as well.⁹ There might be references to Liminals, people who identify themselves as between two or more cultures.

The Three-Fold Stages in a Classroom

The application of Van Gennep's and Turner's three-fold stages (separation, liminality, and communitas) in the ritual process are essential in creating spaces that elevate marginalized voices and experiences. In this section, the three-fold process will be discussed as it relates to the religious classroom. As previously mentioned, separation describes detachment from one's community. In the classroom context, this is similar to students leaving their homes, families, and communities to enter the classroom. This detachment could take place daily or weekly depending on when the student is scheduled to go to the classroom.

When students enter the classroom, they enter the liminal stage. Even though the students come from particular cultures, homes, families and communities, they "tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism" on the basis that they are all students.¹⁰ As they learn, they might draw from their experiences in their communities. However, "their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly."¹¹ The liminal stage is important because transformation takes place; students are fashioned anew through paradigm shifts in their perspective and worldview. This paradigm shift is spurred by hospitality in the prophetic position.

One of the most important transformations that occurs in the liminal classroom is that students learn through dialogue and narrative exchange "that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low."¹² When

⁷ Richard Rohr, *Adam's Return: The Five Promises of Male Initiation*, (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2016): 135.

⁸ Richard Rohr, "On the Edge of the Inside", 1

⁹ We see parallels between the ritual acts that Turner describes in *Rites of Passage* and the ritualistic attendance of class throughout a term. In this 'ritual', students leave their community/households to enter the classroom (liminal space) and then eventually return back to their community.

¹⁰ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 97.

reincorporation into the community occurs during *communitas*, students enter the community with the acknowledgement to an indispensable and common human bond.¹³ Turner posits that “*communitas* has an existential quality; it involves the whole man in his relation to other whole men.”¹⁴ Better understanding and empathy of the “other” essentially mark *Communitas*. People no longer live side by side but rather, with one another.

Hospitality as Robust Love of Stranger and of ‘Strangeness’

The ancient Judeo-Christian tradition of hospitality recognizes outsiders and strangers as bearers and conduits of extraordinary blessing. The call to welcome the stranger is rooted in a robust appreciation of the deep and multifaceted value of otherness as a means through which divinity powerfully encounters and enriches human life and community.¹⁵ Our natural human inclination is to form our deepest bonds with those who share significant aspects of our identity and experience. However, Judeo-Christian hospitality rests upon the premise that it is our difference—our cultural, ideological, and experiential otherness—which adds rich dimension to our practices of mutual sharing.¹⁶ The giving and receiving of two identically-resourced parties amounts to little more than a customary exchange of favors. To host and be hosted by those utterly unlike ourselves, however, blossoms into a three-dimensional hospitality in which our welcome is met and reciprocated, not only with human hospitality, but with divine blessing as well.

A hospitality-oriented approach to religious education recognizes that a student’s particular value to the learning process does not derive from his or her uniformity with others in the classroom or in the broader societal context. Rather, it is those distinct and unparalleled gifts, experiences, and characteristics which uniquely equip each student to contribute much-needed insight in the collective effort to explore what it means to be human and to live rightly in community with one another. By this measure, every student is specially-qualified to participate in the process of transformational education.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 127.

¹⁵ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999) 21.

¹⁶ W. Tali Hairston, “Agents of Reconciliation,” *Mutuality* 21, no 1 (2014): 18.

¹⁷ We have borrowed our vision for transformation and definition of “transformational teaching” from George W. Slavich, who first coined the term and defines it as “the expressed or unexpressed goal to increase students’ mastery of key course concepts while transforming their learning-related attitudes, values, beliefs, and skills...This process involves creating dynamic relationships between teachers, students, and a shared body of knowledge in a way that promotes student learning and personal growth.” Slavich’s view of transformational teaching views collaborative classroom learning experiences as catalysts for sustained personal change beyond the classroom environment. See G.M. Slavich, *Transformational Teaching: E-xcellence in Teaching* 5 (Oct. 5, 2005) 55-59, and G.M. Slavich and Philip G. Zimbardo, “Transformational Teaching: Theoretical Underpinnings, Basic Principles, and Core Methods,” *Educational Psychology Review* 24, no. 4 (2012): 569-608.

Ancient Hospitality

Ethnographic research has revealed that hospitality is one of fewer than 70 social characteristics which is present in every known culture, and is therefore recognized as a cultural universal.¹⁸ Put another way, though the particular practices associated with hospitality may vary from context to context, every people group has established customs for encountering outsiders and welcoming them. In the ancient Mediterranean context—the cradle of civilization—hospitality served as a means through which strangers could be transformed into friends. While at first hearing this may strike one as sentimental, hospitable practices in antiquity were far from mere exercises in warm charitability and social convention. Rather, practices of hospitality existed in part as a social necessity to navigate the dangers of encountering and engaging outsiders. In the ancient context, the practice of hospitality was, for guest and host alike, a matter of life and death.

The strong and protective kinship of ancient communities meant that neighbors knew one another well and were often at least distantly related. In venturing outside the safety of one's community, travelers faced a constant threat of attack while remaining precariously dependent on the hospitality of the strangers they encountered as they journeyed through foreign territory.¹⁹ Likewise, local residents encountering outsiders in their community had little way of knowing whether the strangers were enemy marauders, or simply vulnerable sojourners in need of food and shelter. The transformation of strangers to friends through hospitality, therefore, served as an essential means by which outsiders were evaluated and potential threats neutralized. By establishing relationship and disarming fears, both parties could be increasingly assured of safety in the presence of the 'other.'²⁰

Though these patterns of hospitality were established in an era very different from our contemporary context, we would submit that they bear special relevance and insight for religious education and the task of engaging alterity in a space dominated by white normativity. In the present-day North American context, cultural and ethnic 'strangers' are increasingly viewed with suspicion and fear, or conversely as exotic and mysterious. The former fosters environments in which assimilation to white cultural norms is all but mandatory for survival. The latter lends itself to a mythicizing or caricaturing of the other, reducing an individual to a two-dimensional type of his or her ethnic identity, or to whatever characteristics most alienate him or her from the normative white, western, male identity. In both cases, those perceived as 'non-normative' enter the classroom as outsiders, bearing the steady stress of being detached from the communities in which they themselves are 'normative,' and so precariously at the mercy of a system dominated by white culture, white perspectives, and white sensitivities. Like the ancient near-east, this too is an experience of strangers encountering strangers, and a context in which we suggest that the legitimate doubts, dangers, and distresses of engaging strangers may be alleviated and transformed through sustained practices of hospitality.

¹⁸ John J. Pilch, "Hospitality," *Handbook of Biblical Social Values*, 3rd ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998): 96-99, 131.

¹⁹ Samuel E. Balentine, "Hospitality," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology*, (New York, NY.: Oxford University, 2015), Web.

²⁰ Andrew Arterbury, "Entertaining Angels: Hospitality in Luke-Acts," *Christian Reflection* 25 (2007): 21.

Hospitality in Liminal Spaces

The transformation of stranger to friend in ancient hospitality took place in three distinct moves, which intersect and parallel the threefold structure of liminality. Examination of hospitality practices in liminal spaces offers a fresh vantage point from which to navigate the problem of white normativity and hegemony in the religious education classroom and beyond. This section recognizes both the genuine strain and rich transformative potential of otherness experienced in liminal spaces.

Step One: Evaluation of Outsiders

Upon encountering an outsider in the ancient context, a potential host would begin by evaluating whether the stranger posed a threat to the community. This assessment typically included a test designed to determine whether a guest was sincere and would willingly embrace the values of the society.²¹ Because strangers were commonly perceived as threatening to a community, the invitation of a host represented not only an offer of provision, but also of protection from the host's own kinship community.

This evaluative stage of hospitality coincides with the separation phase of liminality. To be a hospitable host, whether in antiquity or in the contemporary classroom, is to stand in the marginal and often precarious between space one's native community and the vulnerable outsider. Likewise, in order to become a guest, one must first become a stranger, venturing outside one's own community of kinship and into a vulnerable space of unknowing and being unknown. In the language of liminality, this is a form of separation—a space where strangers meet together in the common territory of their mutual strangeness to one another, apart from the native contexts in which each is wholly included, recognized, represented, and known.

Indeed, those who belong to minority and historically-marginalized groups are acutely familiar with the experience of being precariously separate from one's home community and perpetually evaluated as a potentially harmful stranger. The pervasive normativity of whiteness places a heavy burden of strangeness on the shoulders of all who fall outside the narrow field of normativity. This paper proposes that white students and educators participate in the alleviation of this burden of strangeness by taking deliberate steps to bear some of its weight themselves. This is accomplished in part by white students' commitment to enter the classroom as a liminal space—one in which white culture will not be permitted to dominate unchallenged, and in which white normativity will be actively contested. In so doing, white students and educators adopt deliberate separation from their own native community and so begin to share the burden of otherness with their non-white peers. The sharing and shouldering of the experience of otherness draws students together in the uncomfortable but transformative space of liminality. Of this space, Dr. Christine Valters Paintner has reflected, "We each have a threshold of tolerance for uncomfortable or painful experiences...The only way to widen our threshold of tolerance is to dance at its edges, to consciously go to uncomfortable places and stay present. When we risk the unfamiliar, our resilience grows and we become more capable of living life fully."²²

²¹ Samuel E. Balentine, "Hospitality."

²² Christine Valters Paintner, "The Spiritual Practice of Being Uncomfortable." *Patheos* (blog), May 24, 2011.

In the context of religious education as a liminal space, then, the predominating unifier among those present is their common otherness. Hospitality invites a willing submission to the uncomfortable and life-giving experience of being and encountering each other as ‘stranger’ as the necessary first step to mutually-empowering friendship. To acknowledge otherness in this way—not as a kind of mystical exoticism or fearful strangeness, but as a simple fact of difference—postures students to embrace one another with what Z.D. Gurevitch describes as an “ability to not understand.” Elaborating on this concept, Gurevitch writes:

The ability to not understand is the ability to recognize and behold the other (or the self) as an other. In a moment of not understanding, what had been considered “understood” is relinquished as mere image...It highlights the other side of dialogue, the threatening yet exciting realm of strangeness, distance, and not understanding. When the other is perceived as strange, he or she is liberated from the image that one has projected onto the other’s experience from the center of one’s self. The other then emerges as an independent and distant phenomenon.²³

The hospitality of the ancient world presupposed strangeness as one of its central components. Hospitality was not a practice extended to family and friends, but was extended as the particular form of welcome to those outside one’s community.²⁴

The preliminary stage of hospitality recognizes that a robust commitment to friendship cannot be established unless it is preceded by a period of evaluation and trust-building through sustained engagement. Whether in the ancient near-eastern wilderness or the contemporary religious education classroom, hospitality is meant to be neither blindly undiscerning, nor captive to comfort or controlled by fear. Hospitality, for guest and host alike, requires conscious and measured courage in venturing beyond the borders of security and into the liminal space of being a stranger and encountering strangers. “Hospitality begins at the gate,” writes Christine Pohl, “in the doorway, on the bridges between public and private space. Finding and creating threshold places is important for contemporary expressions of hospitality.”²⁵ Together, the inherent liminality of the classroom, the ritualistic weekly gathering and dispersing, and the spiritual and interpersonal nature of religious education offer a valuable threshold space for the cultivation of hospitable engagement. Each instance of vulnerable submission, empathic listening, and prophetic speaking is a moment in which love is tangibly expressed, trust is built, and strangers’ capacity for friendship is deepened.

Stage Two: Transformation of Strangers to Liminal Guests

Once ancient sojourners had demonstrated that they pose no threat of violence, a host could invite them into the liminal phase of hospitality—the move from stranger to guest.²⁶ In any context, the role of guest involves a degree of disenfranchisement, and even in the context of the

²³ Z.D. Gurevitch, “The Power of Not Understanding: The Meeting of Conflicting Identities,” *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 25 no. 2 (1989), 163.

²⁴ John J. Pilch, “Hospitality,” 96.

²⁵ Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 95.

²⁶ John J. Pilch, “Hospitality,” 97.

most genuine generosity, the role of host constitutes a position of power.²⁷ The power of a host arises from the availability of resources, relational connectedness, and social privilege. As a possessor of needed resources, the host reserves the right to determine how and to whom those resources are distributed. Further, a host remains in close proximity to his or her own community and resources, and so maintains the protection of the dominant community, as well as the power to withdraw the offer of hospitality at any time. By contrast, the sojourner, even in the relative safety of the host's care, remains precariously separated from the security of his or her own community, and subject to the authority and expectations of the host community. For this reason, a hard distinction between guest and host produces a miniature power structure which mirrors the imbalance of power that exists within the broader society—an imbalance which is in many ways responsible for the marginalization of the 'guests' in the first place.

Thus, if left unchecked, the power of hosts can perpetuate the disenfranchisement of the very guests they seek to welcome.²⁸ Any relationship in which one party perpetually serves as host and the other as guest is a relationship of oppression. By contrast, the more dynamically these roles are shared, the greater the relationship's capacity for mutuality and intimacy. Mutual sharing of guest and host roles is stimulated by a liminal environment in which possession of the space remains fluid. As contributions are made from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, ownership of the space is passed from one person to another and back again. Continual pendulation between guest and host is itself a challenging liminal experience, requiring sustained commitment and ongoing practice in receiving possession and readily relinquishing it.²⁹ In the context of the religious education classroom, the educator serves as facilitator and guide for shared ownership of the space, as well as the primary example, modeling a dynamic balance of guesting and hosting, self-expression and self-sacrifice, prophetic sharing and authentic listening.

In the widespread white normativity of the North American context, white individuals naturally and often unwittingly bear the privilege of a host—one on whose terms and in whose space dialogue occurs, events are interpreted, and sociopolitical resources are shared. Therefore it is important to recognize that majority and minority students, even when equally submitted to the experience of 'strangeness' in the liminal classroom, do not come to that experience on equal terms. White individuals generally have far less knowledge of minority cultures than minority students have of majority culture. Those from historically underrepresented and marginalized groups learn white culture as a matter of survival; white individuals, if they are to learn minority culture at all, typically do so as a matter of personal or professional interest.

Therefore, it is not enough simply to invite culturally and ethnically diverse students and resources into a classroom space and expect genuine transformation and cultural competency to naturally precipitate.³⁰ Rather, the existing imbalance of power must be met with efforts toward counterbalance through practices of hospitality and submission to the other. The aim of

²⁷ Tobias Brandner, "Hosts and Guests: Hospitality as an Emerging Paradigm in Mission," *International Review of Mission Int Rev Missions* 102, no. 1 (2013): 96.

²⁸ Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 118-9.

²⁹ Nathan Loewen has explored some practical challenges and implications of sharing guest and host roles in the religious education classroom in his helpful article entitled "Whose Place Is This Anyway? Reflecting upon Hospitality and Higher Education," *Teaching Theology & Religion* 19, no. 1, (2016): 4-19.

³⁰ Nathan Loewen, "Whose Place Is This Anyway?," 8.

counterbalance is to invert the static guest and host roles inherent in a white normative environment and to foster shared possession of the classroom by offering safe and meaningful opportunity for systematically-marginalized students to serve as empowered hosts. This goal requires concerted effort especially on the part of majority students and educators to increase cultural competency and practice identification and interrogation of whiteness as a non-universal experience.³¹

Stage Three: Friendship Becomes Kinship

The third and final phase of ancient hospitality is the establishment of friendship, which coincides with the *communitas* stage of liminality. This phase took place at the time of a guest's departure from the host's home. If the departure took place on good terms, they parted as friends, which implied a commitment to an ongoing bond of fictive kinship between the host's community and the guest's.³² A guest departing from a host as friend was expected to return home "singing the praises" of the host among relatives and friends, so that the relationship of security and trust that had been cultivated between guest and host could be shared with the entire community.³³

In terms of hospitality practiced in the contemporary religious education classroom, this final step is exceedingly important for lasting transformation beyond the classroom setting. Because students and educators often originate from largely homogeneous communities, the separation and subsequent transformation of the liminal classroom is meant ultimately to prepare them to return to those communities with new tools, competencies, and practices for engaging strangers and transforming them into friends. The sharing of guest and host roles and creation of counterbalance are learned and tested in the small-scale liminality of the classroom so that they may be further refined and implemented in each student's professional and social context beyond the classroom. The education of a liminal classroom seeks to equip and empower those who share that sacred space to return home "singing the praises" of their strangers-turned-friends. In this way, the relationships of mutual trust, respect, and empowerment first established in sacred seclusion may be carried out into the public space of daily life and shared with one's entire community.

³¹ The proposal that the greater proportion of responsibility in combating white hegemony belongs to white students and educators is derived in part from Miroslav Volf's discussion of "the nonsymmetry of relationship." This concept recognizes that relationship is always and inextricably bound to the power dynamics of its context. Volf concludes, "[Hierarchies] must be inverted....The equality and reciprocity that are at the heart of embrace can be reached only through self-sacrifice, even if self-sacrifice is not a positive good, but a necessary *via dolorosa* in a world of enmity and indifference toward the joy of reciprocal embrace." See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, 145-6.

³² Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, 17.

³³ John J. Pilch, "Hospitality," 97.

Practices of Sacred Seclusion

In light of the above conceptual analysis of liminality and hospitality in the context of religious education, we would like to offer a few practical insights for embracing the liminal experience of otherness, extending and receiving hospitality, fostering shared possession of the liminal classroom, and creating counterbalance. The practices suggested here are just a few means that have been proven effective for accomplishing these aims in the classroom. However, as a particular group of students and educators become more familiar with one another, including the specific gifts, values, and needs of each, they will likely discover additional and more tailored practices of hospitality that are especially meaningful and fruitful for their context.

One of the simplest and most significant opportunities to practice hospitality in the liminal classroom is through a particular approach to dialogue. The acts of speaking and listening closely parallel the roles of hosting and being guest. Active listening creates energized space into which the other can enter freely and become increasingly known. Courageous sharing, particularly out of those places and experiences that make us feel most ‘other,’ foster deepened empathy and understanding, while drawing others to share courageously as well. In their book, *Execution*, Ram Charan and Bossidy describe the transformative power of dialogue:

Dialogue alters the psychology of a group. It can either expand a group’s capacity to think or shrink it. It can be energizing or energy-draining. It can create self-confidence and optimism, or it can produce pessimism. It can create unity, or it can create bitter factions. Robust dialogue brings out reality, even when that reality makes people feel uncomfortable, because it has purpose and meaning. It is open, tough, focused, and informal. The aim is to invite multiple viewpoints, see the pros and cons of each one, and try honestly and candidly to construct new viewpoints. This is the dynamic that stimulates new questions, new ideas, and new insights rather than wasting energy defending the old order.³⁴

Closely related to dialogue is the practice of storytelling. From our earliest childhood, narrative deeply shapes our identity and our understanding of the world around us. Sharing personal narratives offers students opportunity to communicate something about their sense of self and relation to the world.³⁵ Listening to the narratives of others allows us to practice “the ability not to understand” and instead to know and engage with others as they present themselves to be, and not as what we assume they are.³⁶ Storytelling not only fosters understanding, relationship, and empathy, but also forms and transforms our very sense of self, reorienting our own identities in relation to the identities of those with whom stories are shared. It is important to note that the sharing of minority students does not constitute a representation of one’s entire cultural identity group. No single person or story is capable of adequately representing entire cultures, nor is it reasonable to place such a burden. To this end, award-winning novelist and acclaimed feminist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, has stated, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are

³⁴ Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan, *Execution: the Discipline of Getting Things Done*, (New York: Random House, 2011): 104.

³⁵ Dean P. Manternach, “Moral Dynamics of Storytelling: Inviting Transformation,” Paper presented at the Religious Education Association Annual Meeting, Dubuque, IA, November 2006, 3.

³⁶ Nathan Loewen, “Whose Place Is This Anyway?,” 6.

incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”³⁷ By contrast, as greater numbers of stories are shared, stereotypes and two-dimensional views give way to more rich, nuanced, and full-orbed understanding.

Finally, counterbalance is created in introducing non-white and non-western resources, as well as equipping students to seek out and engage diverse resources as well. By tailoring course outcomes to highlight the central role that non-white contributions are expected to play. Likewise, by requiring interaction with authors of a variety of backgrounds on key course assignments, students are equipped with skills for cross-cultural academic engagement and for building cultural competency on their own beyond the classroom. On the part of white western students and educators, the bridging of the cultural competency gap requires additional effort in the form of active listening, self-reflection, and critical analysis. Underrepresented and non-white students, by contrast, create counterbalance through courageous engagement and patient perspective sharing in the presence of those peers who have much yet to learn.

Conclusion

The Kalenjin rite of passage calls boys into seclusion from their community in order to send them back again, after a period of transformation, fully-equipped to take their place as leaders in the community. Similarly, religious education students enter the sacred liminal space of the classroom, leaving behind their own communities, in order to return home as agents of transformation. The weekly ritual of students’ gathering into the classroom and dispersing into their communities cultivates a sacred space in which the repeated encounters of strangers gives way to a rich camaraderie of friendship. In facilitating this sacred space, educators lead the way in both teaching and demonstrating submission to the role of guest and creation of counterbalance in order to empower and amplify marginalized voices. A dynamic sharing of guest and host roles opens students to a new and uncomfortable experiences of otherness. It is precisely the discomfort and disorientation inherent in these liminal spaces which makes it a prophetic position in which genuine transformation can occur.

³⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” Speech presented at TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, July 2009.

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