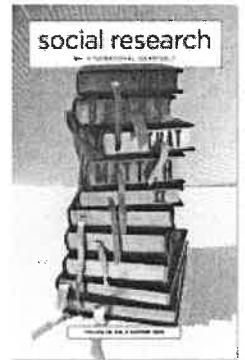Living the In-Between with Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* : *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* , Victor Turner

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Living the In-Between with Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process*

The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, Victor Turner

AS A COLLEGE FRESHMAN IN OCTOBER 1965, I READ *TRISTES TROPIQUES*. IN THIS book Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1955] 1971) writes about the anthropologist's vocation to make the familiar strange. Travel can be a first step, but what really matters is cultivating fresh vision. Things that seem natural and therefore invisible have to be made new enough to see. Lévi-Strauss calls it *dépaysement*, the kind of distancing that allows one to return more fully home.

I seized on this idea as soon as I met it.

At 18, I left Brooklyn and my life in a sheltered Jewish household for Radcliffe College, the "sister school" where women who attended Harvard College were officially enrolled at the time. Out of touch with everything familiar, I assessed my childhood. I saw a tribalism that had been invisible to me when I lived with the tribe and a paranoia about Christians that seemed instinctive rather than realistic. My family lived in the shadow of the Holocaust. From a distance, I could address all this with compassion and begin a less burdened life.

Once at Harvard, I no longer fit in Brooklyn. But neither did I entirely belong in my new world—the tea parties, the brandies, the unaccustomed amount of cutlery at mealtimes. During freshman

week, in the thick of a competition to get into a political science seminar, I was asked what "quarterlies" I read. I knew not to say that in Brooklyn the only publication delivered to our apartment was the magazine *Seventeen*—my mother had gotten me a subscription for my sixteenth birthday. From the margins of Harvard citizenship, I surveyed my new circumstances. At Harvard, women could attend classes, but none were on the tenured faculty; they could not use the undergraduate library or qualify for most postgraduate fellowships. Things had always been this way. But I hadn't grown up among people who knew about the Harvard of "always."

Then, when I was 19, an even more radical dislocation was forced upon me. For years, in secret, my mother had suffered from breast cancer. She died during Christmas break of my junior year. Her death led to a family crisis, and I had to drop out of college. My grandfather wanted me as far away from my stepfather as possible. Emptying his bank account, my grandfather bought me the cheapest travel fare to Paris: by air from New York to Reykjavik, then to Luxembourg, and finally by bus to the Gare d'Orsay.

In Paris, mourning my mother, I was out of my academic life and its presumptions about my future.

Now I was close with a few people at the market, like the man who sold me flowers. A new friend showed me how to cook a full meal, from appetizers to salad to dessert, in my room with a camp stove. Another let me take a bath in her apartment once a week. I felt most at home among others who, like me, did not feel at home. I cleaned the apartment of a bourgeois couple in the seventh arrondissement in exchange for a room. They called me their *portugaise* because most of the women who had done my job before me were indeed Portuguese. I floated, out of names and country. I felt what it was like to be known as a generic person. From that position, you can see that what had once seemed normal blinded you to what was suppressed.

I went to France at an auspicious time to be making such private discoveries. It was the year after the social and political upheaval of May 1968. The May days began with a revolt against the atrophied

French university but went on to become a challenge to the hierarchical structures that governed every aspect of French life. That society's elaborate rules took the spontaneity out of every social encounter. For a brief time, France exploded with speech that defied boundaries of class and convention. The French became strangers to their own country but closer to each other. It was a time betwixt and between.

A few years later, while I was studying at the University of Chicago, the anthropologist Victor Turner taught me about living in such betwixt and between times, which he called threshold or *liminal* moments. In *The Ritual Process*, first delivered as a series of lectures in 1966 and published in 1970, the year I studied with Turner, he describes liminality in the context of his work with the Ndembu of Zambia and their initiation rituals. In liminal moments, old social rules are declared irrelevant and new ones are not yet set in place. Unlike dépaysement, a general notion of becoming a stranger to what was once familiar, Turner saw liminal states as a natural part of life's processional. In social life, times of anti-structure need to be in balance with times of structure.

The Ritual Process directly addressed its moment. By the late 1960s, major institutions and belief systems—public, private, financial, religious—were showing their fissures. Relations between men and women and between generations were in transition. For the individual, understanding one's life as being in flux allowed for creativity and fluidity. Liminality was a positive identity for a generation shaped by the civil rights movement, anti-war protests, the women's movement, and the struggle for gay rights. *The Ritual Process* gave standing apart a positive spin. It was a "moment of meantime" during which people were capable of different, stronger bonds. In this space, people could see each other not in their traditional social roles but as human beings. Turner called this *communitas*. He likened it to Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relationship (Buber [1923] 1970) and said new ideas are born in the crucible of this constructive disorder.

Turner argued that while traditional social science viewed moments like May 1968 as pathological—a symptom that social order

has broken down to reveal an underlying disease—in fact, the opposite was true; times of social disorder are normal and healthy. And anthropologists needed to pursue ethnographies not only of structure but also of anti-structure, those seemingly chaotic times when new social forms emerge. This means attending to the specificity of the betwixt and between and to movements that cross thresholds. Only then could one study the unclassifiable moments when the world opens up to new visions and communitas.

When I applied Turner's theories in my 1975 essay "Symbol and Festival in the French Student Uprising (May–June 1968)," I stressed how the French had created a time of anti-structure in which new forms of relating flourished (Turkle 1975, 68–100). Students put aside the rules that dictated how they were to dress, progress, compete, and even find their mate. For a short time, the boundary state in France was a positive and creative place. *The* most positive and creative place.

In the decades that followed, ideas about the power of the threshold grew in significance in my work. Beginning in the mid-1980s, through the influence of computational thinking, there were fundamental changes taking place in how psychology imagined the self. There was first a shift from focusing on meaning to thinking about mechanism (Turkle 1984). Once cast as Freudian slips, lapses in speech were now envisioned as information processing errors. Then, mechanistic models of mind made way for a new culture of simulation. If mind is ultimately mechanism, one aspires to transparency in its description. But simulation thrives in the opaque computing environments where users stay on the surface of things. In this new world, augured by the icons on the screen, if digital objects behave in a lifelike manner, users are asked to take them "at interface value." In simulation culture, theorists of the boundary are the most relevant theorists of all—because the crucial objects-to-think-with in simulation culture are objects on the boundary between the real and the digital.

Soon, generations needed to learn how to go through adolescence, the classic transitional moment, in a new boundary space, on-

line space, something they could not learn from their elders. How would they separate from the physical world to exist in this parallel digital world and then find a way to reintegrate with "the rest" (Turkle 1995)? In online space, one crosses a boundary to become an avatar not bound by the constraints of past or concurrent lives lived in the flesh. One is free to invent a new digital self. What are its rights and its responsibilities? What does it owe to "real life"—if it owes anything at all? Is it a self-in-training to be a better citizen of the "real" it leaves behind or runs parallel to? These questions about a life in-between have been current for decades and are now all the more urgent as we contemplate the seductions of the metaverse.

Most recently, *The Ritual Process* has been relevant to thinking about American society and its pandemic experience.

Liminality is the state of people who have fallen out of recognized communities and straightforward relationships with shared social norms. It is the sense of permanent threshold that Americans experience when they face a virus that plays by one set of rules, politicians who play by another, and a professional life that proceeds independently of each. Thinking about the possibilities and limitations of liminality suggests that COVID's tragedy is an opportunity to see our country anew.

In March 2020, Americans all became as though voyagers in another country.

We all left one world and entered a time out of time. Quite literally, like those going through a rite of initiation, we shed our traditional garb, abandoned our workplaces, ate new foods, and found new routines. We left the habitual without a map for our next steps. We communicated in a new language, a screen language. We had learned it before, but now it was suffused with different cadences, purposes, and urgency.

This stepping into a between time provided new vision. Some of what we saw was positive: the importance of family ties, the generosity of neighbors, the grace of small kindness. But much was searing: systemic racism and police violence; food lines across the country and

an insurrection at the Capitol; a broken health care system. COVID's dislocations made all of these more visible. For many, that didn't fit with their story of America.

How we come out of this—if we can use what we have seen to make our country stronger—is now our test. Our forced liminality is an opportunity to view America more honestly, creatively, and empathically.

Take, for example, our relationship with technology. Even now we think back to our Zoom weddings, cocktail hours, staff meetings, and lectures as the rituals of our in-between times. In the darkest days of COVID lockdowns, technology helped keep our economy and spirits going. But our loss of face-to-face contact dramatized the limitations of screen communication. As we define a new normal, we will need to act with deliberateness. While some organizations want everyone back in the office, others privilege the conveniences of keeping workers remote, at their screens. When remote work saves money, organizations can't remember what is missed of the office—or whether they do miss it.

In *The Ritual Process*, Turner calls our fundamental desire to be together "humankindness." He sees humankindness in liminal states where people show up "in their wholeness, fully attending." Our longing for humankindness during the pandemic reminds us that we give up so much of it in digital culture, whether in pandemic times or not.

When we were forced online during COVID, two things happened that were only superficially at odds: we constructed a more valuable remote experience because of its economic and emotional advantages, and we longed for the full embrace of the human. It was natural to feel a greater connection with others because of the fears and loneliness we shared.

Coming out of the pandemic, we can ask: Will this end as it began? Will we have a close approximation of the old normal, with some portion of the citizenry having a greater understanding of how to behave in a public health crisis? Or will it end with greater repression of truths too hard to admit, with new structures that prevent them from being seen? Reading *The Ritual Process* now, far from the

socially optimistic moment in which Turner wrote it, it is striking that he leaves all options open. He is careful to say that the balance between structure and anti-structure is delicate. When people experience too much anti-structure, they can long for despotism. But anti-structure can also inspire us to become more than we have been.

During COVID's waves of fear and isolation, I felt a deep connection with other people experiencing this unique time out of time. I saw the irony of Zoom communitas, but there it was. I had had that feeling at other times when I stood apart from the world and had somehow been made more receptive to its complexity.

During my time in Paris, when I worked as a cleaner in exchange for lodging, one of the few expensive calls I made was to ask my grandmother how to clean windows without Windex. My grandmother knew: ammonia and yesterday's newspapers. I remember fearing that I would lose my room if I didn't get it right. I never knew that fear again, but the experience helped me understand the anxiety of so many for whom it is a routine part of life.

It may be possible to use our COVID experience as a path toward becoming better citizens. Americans would have to take what we shared during the pandemic as a step toward developing a greater capacity for empathy. To start, we would have to learn to listen across difference.

It wouldn't begin with "I know how you feel." Rather, it would begin with the humility to say "I *don't* know how you feel." Empathy is an offer of accompaniment and commitment. It offers hope to the person who is being heard, and it enlarges the person who offers it. When you realize how much you have to learn about someone else, you understand how much you don't know about yourself.

Now, as Americans consider the country that the United States will be after the pandemic, it is a question of whether people will protect privilege or be willing to hear Americans who live on the edge of despair. Will we even be willing to count the votes of all our compatriots? Our failure to conduct our nation's affairs in a thoughtful, deliberate way got us to this point of crisis. And now we need to find our way out.

The in-between of the pandemic gives us the possibility to see our country as if from the outside. It is hard because so many Americans see America through the haze of myth. The American myth involves words like "melting pot" and images of new citizens pledging allegiance for the first time and being welcomed into an American family. It doesn't include images of segregated army units or people who were shot while simply walking, jogging, driving, or waiting for fast food. You have to step out of the Fourth of July parade to see that. The Trump presidency, the 2020 summer of Black Lives Matter protests, the Georgia election, the attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021—the experience of all these events during a liminal time can help get us to a new place.

Understanding the power of liminality was my life's opportunity. And perhaps it is now the country's opportunity. America's challenge is to build a congregation of people who are comfortable betwixt and between—who can turn away from anomie and isolation to empathy and community. The hope is that in doing so we won't squander but will capitalize on the moment before us—liminal, terrifying, unsafe, trembling with possibility.

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