

Episode 2: In God's waiting room

RSVP Podcast Season 1

Introduction

JT: A wonderful day to all! My name is Jo-ed Tome, your companion in responding to the divine invitation. Welcome to the second episode of the RSVP podcast. Today, we will be talking about LIMINAL SPACE or as we like to call it, "God's waiting room". This may sound new to your ears but I'm sure it's something you have experienced before. With us again is the executive director of On the Third Day Renewal and Formation Center, Ms. Lita Quimson - Feliciano. A wonderful day, Lita.

AQF: Thank you Jo-ed. It's great to be back for the second episode.

JT: We have a very interesting topic today and I'm sure our listeners are eager to learn about it so let us begin. What is a 'liminal space' and how does one know he/she is in it?

AQF: **Liminal space** (or liminality) is that unfamiliar space in between what used to be and what has not come yet. This comes from the Latin 'limen' meaning 'threshold'. A liminal space is a space where transitions happen. It is where we find ourselves after leaving behind a comfortable space while not having any certainty of what lies ahead. A liminal space evokes a whole range of emotions. There can be great tension but also genuine transformation.

JT: So these are transitions. Can you give us some examples?

AQF: There are natural liminal spaces all throughout a person's life. A young person spends time in a liminal space in transition to becoming an adult. In that space, the person knows he is no longer a child but does not have a clue yet who he really is. A newly-wed

couple leaves the freedom and bliss of singlehood and now faces a life together having no clue how to make it work. A woman in her 50s suddenly feels a major shift as she enters midlife, leaving behind a life that simply does not fit anymore.

JT: It is much like that in-between stage where you are neither here nor there.

AQF: Some liminal spaces are a bit less predictable. A father gets laid off and finds himself in a space where he simply does not know what to do to take care of his family. A mother of four mourns the death of her husband while facing a life of uncertainty. A young seminarian endures sleepless nights realizing he is not at the right place but does not have a clue where he truly belongs.

JT: Those are all different scenarios. What is common among these people?

AQF: The people in those examples all stand at a threshold where the old rules, habits, values, and beliefs no longer make sense but there are still no new ones in sight. They are in a unique and mysterious space where there are no handles or manuals, the signs are blurry and confusing, and a whirlwind of emotions is evident. Some of them are brought in that space by natural life transitions while some are catapulted by drastic life changes.

JT: Does a pandemic like COVID count?

AQF: Yes, a very relevant example of a liminal space is the place where COVID-19 has thrown the world.

I imagine it to be like dominoes falling. The first tile—COVID-19—fell and everything changed in just a matter of days. Our retreats could not go as originally planned. All

meetings had to be cancelled for the time being. We could not go out to buy supplies. Everything had to be reconsidered. Business as usual simply was not possible. We were thrown into a space where everything seems to be unfamiliar and tentative. The same rules do not apply anymore. The name of the game is unknown. Everybody was groping, trying to reach handles that were simply not there.

JT: It is a struggle.

AQF: The first weeks involved a lot of struggling, of fighting the fast-approaching changes, of trying to take control of a situation that did not have a name or a face. We find ourselves stuck in our homes, itching to go back to our old routines but afraid that the virus was just right outside our door.

JT: And even if we could go out, where would we go?

AQF: Right. Establishments are closed. Questions lead to more questions rather than answers. We are in a complete standstill. We grow tired of resisting. We are pinned down in the present moment. And there seems to be nothing else we can do but to wait. For what, we ask? No one really knows. Maybe some of us are waiting to go back to the life that was. Maybe some are waiting for the new normal. Some might be dying to just get over this situation.

JT: It's a difficulty most, if not all of us can relate to.

AQF: Being in a liminal space feels like falling for many people. The unfamiliar place seems dark and all handles are gone. All the confusion about what to believe in and where to go compound the growing anxiety of not knowing what they are supposed to do.

JT: It doesn't sound like a very comfortable place to be in. Scary, even.

AQF: Still for others, being in a liminal space feels like floating. Jumping from the old life, the next ledge is nowhere in sight. They feel suspended in mid-air where excitement and fear mix and fluctuate. At times there is a rush coming from a sense of adventure and in other times there is a pang of lostness resulting from the absence of anything familiar.

AQF: I'm sure you have your own experience of being in a liminal space, Jo-ed. Would you like to share it with us?

JT: I recall a couple of months ago when it was my turn to go out and buy supplies for my community in the pandemic. There were probably at least forty people in front of me waiting for their turn to enter the supermarket. The line snaked from the entrance of the supermarket to the side of the staircase chopped by the exit to the parking space and then continuing to the side of the deserted food kiosks. It was my first time in that supermarket but I could imagine how it used to look like pre-COVID.

AQF: What was the situation like? Was it chaotic?

JT: I liked the set up actually. People lined up. They stayed within the marked lines to make sure social distancing was observed. Everybody was wearing a face mask. Many had a face shield. Some wore a cap. A few had their gloves on. I was wearing all those four items. I could not take any chances. Although my get up was uncomfortable I appreciated how the establishment tried to extend hospitality to those lining up to the grocery. Celine Dion was tirelessly singing in the background, there was a gentle breeze, and there were chairs to accommodate those who grew tired of standing. There was a system in place and all of us in line were in our best behavior.

Two minutes after I submitted myself in the human conveyor belt, I realized I was not very good at waiting. The line felt like it was never going to move. My mind was shooting in all directions thinking of the calls I should be making, emails I should be sending, and

the retreats I should be preparing for. My phone was too slow for the work I wanted it to do. How I wished I had my laptop with me. I should have brought a book! I looked around and saw other people like me who did not know what to do with themselves. Whoever we were competing against in this waiting game must be winning big time.

AQF: That is so you, Jo-ed!

JT: After all is said and done, the only thing left to do is wait. In this particular space and in many liminal spaces we find ourselves in, everything boils down to waiting. However, the past weeks have taught us that many, if not most, of us are not very good at waiting, at staying still. And yet, it seems that, ironically, the best way to move around the liminal space is to stop moving.

Observe people in a queue and notice how they try to escape from the situation. Some busy themselves by checking their messages. A few would express dismay and pressure those in charge to speed up. Time is too precious to be wasted on standing in line. The daughter of an ailing mother calls the office of their doctor every five minutes to check if the results are in. She cannot help it because waiting is just killing her. A man immediately reaches his Bible app in search of the perfect verse to make his friend's family better after learning about his death an hour ago.

AQF: It seems that when we find ourselves in a liminal space, we immediately and naturally try to restore some form of order and control in our environment. The uncertainty is just too uncomfortable. The pain is just too bearable. The confusion is too much. So instead of staying in the liminal space, we look back and wish the old rules apply again, that the reality we left behind is right here to console us.

JT: That's exactly it.

AQF: The Israelites gave us a glimpse of this as they wandered in the desert, far from Egypt which was their home for as long as they could remember and not yet in the land promised by God to their ancestors. But the trip was just too difficult. Their leader was no good for them. God was nowhere to be found. The promises were not yet fulfilled. If they could choose whether to go back to slavery or endure the journey through the wilderness, they would have chosen the former because it was a predictable life. It might have been full of suffering but it was familiar.

JT: They have grown accustomed to their previous life.

AQF: Looking back is instinctual. Oh how people cling to what has been, desiring for things to go back to what they used to be. Maybe this is why many self-help books about leadership and motivation talk about going out of one's comfort zone. That space has already taught us what we need to know and the only way to grow is to step out of it and become a 'better version' of ourselves, like what many would say these days. But that stepping out of the comfort zone is but a permission for us to be placed in a space where transformation happens. We do not go straight to that all new and better condition.

JT: There seems to be an invitation to let go and surrender.

AQF: Submission, then, is another important attitude one should have while in a liminal space. This space where everything is tentative requires one to submit him or herself to the process. Submission may seem to be a passive act like floating or sitting in meditation. But the road to it involves a lot of getting over ourselves. Navigating through the liminal space means relinquishing control, letting go of our desire to predict and be in charge of the process. It is futile to look for the old rules because what applies are odd rules. There is no map or Waze to tell us where to turn. Our compass is authenticity. We dispense extra amounts of patience and understanding to ourselves simply because we know that we do not know.

JT: A crucial part of it is admitting that we do not know and we do not have control over what comes next.

AQF: When we let ourselves be embraced by the liminal space, we start to see with a new pair of eyes. We see, listen, taste, smell, and feel in new ways. We let go of our defenses. We stop explaining ourselves. We shed the masks we wear because they are no longer relevant. One writer observed that “Israel’s most creative work was done when they were a marginalized people, no longer a dominant force in the nation, no longer setting the pace.”

JT: It’s like being stripped off our false selves to reveal our true selves.

AQF: We finally see that the liminal space is not as dark as we imagined. If we look closely, we see that there is enough light for the next step. And this light gives us hope and consolation that even though waiting is extremely uncomfortable and submission is too painful, we are being held by a Hand more powerful than our ego. And even though sometimes it feels like death, the tomb is actually a womb—cradling us, preparing us for a new birth.

JT: What is the significance of liminal spaces in one’s spiritual life?

AQF: In the time of pandemic, it is a wonderful thing to observe that people are more connected to each other than ever. What we lack in physical presence we make up for in virtual presence. People suddenly have time to connect with friends and make that long overdue call. Family and friends are easy to catch these days. After all, we are at home with nowhere else to go.

JT: We are cornered and cannot run away anymore.

AQF: God has finally caught up with us. The liminal space is a place of genuine encounter with ourselves and God. This is where we sit, stay, and let ourselves be found. The liminal space makes us realize that sometimes it is not about us finding our way but about letting God find us. And since there are no handles or structures, there is nowhere to hide. Richard Rohr said it best when he noted that the liminal space is “the realm where God can best get at us because our false certitudes are finally out of the way.”

JT: The liminal space is where we allow God to find us.

AQF: As we sit in God’s waiting room, we hold all the confusions and uncertainties surrounding us. We learn to not resist but to make space for the Spirit to move. We remember that the very beginning of the world as we know it was in a liminal space where the Spirit of God hovered over the waters, turning the chaos into a beautiful creation. Liminal space, then, is a fertile ground for transformation to happen. It is the perfect space to examine our faith, wrestle with our fears and doubts, and explore our desires.

JT: It’s only possible if we allow the transformation to happen.

AQF: God’s invitation for us to loosen our grip on the old answers, the established beliefs, the tried and tested ways, and even the comfortable view of ourselves is an invitation to make space. The emptying of our hands is but a preparation to receive something new. The liminal space shakes off our many attachments so that things we no longer need fall off, things that no longer make sense are replaced with something more genuine and relevant.

Conclusion

JT: That is beautiful. What will you give our listeners as a takeaway?

AQF: The liminal space encourages us to be vulnerable to God, to meet him in a place where our true self is the only version of ourselves that can survive. This space of “radical unmaking and unlearning” invites us to sit still and say, “Okay, God, I am here. What do you want to teach me?”

JT: Thank AQF

Invite to watch out for the next episode

Once again this is Jo-ed Tome and this has been the RSVP Podcast.