

"Required reading for anyone who works with other humans."

PAMELA SLIM, author of *Body of Work*

# the art of holding space

a practice of love,  
liberation, and leadership



heather plett



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## liminal space

IN ORDER TO understand the concept of holding space, we need to peer deeper into the **space we're holding** to catch a glimpse of what it is.

When we hold space in the simplest of ways—such as when we're listening to a friend tell us about a disappointing first date—the space may not seem very complex or deep. It's simply a space for a story, a space for some emotion, a space for truth telling. It requires kindness and empathic listening, but it's the kind of space-holding we've been doing since childhood, so it likely doesn't require a deep understanding or skill level.

I have a collapsible bowl (made from silicon and sold at camping stores as a portable container) that helps me teach the ways we hold space at varying depths. Sometimes we hold only "shallow" space (such as when a friend tells a story about how tired she is from having a new baby), sometimes we hold "medium" space (such as when that friend admits to how her tiredness is making her susceptible to having some old trauma triggered), and sometimes we hold "deep" space (such as when that friend's baby has just died and she is lost in despair).

When we hold deep space in more complex situations, what we're holding is an in-between place that is strange, vast, and sometimes uncomfortable, a space full of complex and often overlapping emotions. I call this **liminal space**.

The word "liminal" originates from the Latin word *limen*, which means "a threshold." In anthropology, liminality is "the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. During a ritual's liminal stage, participants 'stand at the threshold' between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way, which the ritual establishes."<sup>5</sup>

Liminal space, then, is a period in which something-social hierarchy, culture, belief, tradition, identity, etc.-has been dissolved and a new thing has not yet emerged to take its place (i.e., the journey your friend makes through grief from expectant mother to a new identity as a childless mother after suffering a miscarriage). It's that period of uncertainty, ambiguity, restlessness, fear, discomfort, and anguish. It's the space between, when a trapeze artist lets go of one bar and doesn't yet know whether they will be able to catch the other bar.

There is nothing shallow or easy about liminal space. In the article "Grieving as Sacred Space," Richard Rohr describes liminal space as

*a unique spiritual position where human beings have to be but where the biblical God is always leading them. It is when you have left the "tried and true" but have not yet been able to replace it with anything else. It is when you are finally out of the way. It is when you are in between your old comfort zone and any possible new answer. It is no fun.<sup>6</sup>*

In the summer of 2016, along with millions of Canadians, I witnessed an example of liminal space unfold in front of me on a TV screen as singer-songwriter Gord Downie performed his final concert. In a remarkable show of courage and strength, he'd gone out on tour with his band, The Tragically Hip, even though he had inoperable brain cancer that has since killed him. In a moment I don't think I'll ever forget, with pure anguish written on his face and tears rolling down his cheeks, he unleashed a primal scream that ripped through the air and left a scar across the whole country. This was not a scream that could be resolved. It was not a cry for help or for pity. It was a scream that emerged from the deepest place in him and the deepest places within us. It was a scream from the depths of liminal space.

When we hold liminal space, we must be willing to hold that scream, to witness it without judging or resolving it. We must be willing to be in both the darkest and lightest of places with another, to be alongside that kind of anguish and terror in tandem with the profound joy and celebration of a life well lived. We must be willing to crack open and be at our rawest and most vulnerable. We are willing to hold each other in that unresolved place.

This is what I mean when I talk about holding space. This is that kind of "holding space" that's tossed about on social media, when people want to say something meaningful in response to someone's pain without getting too involved. It's something much deeper and more profound. It can rip you apart and leave you breathless. It can require more of you than you knew you had to give. It can take strength and courage and resilience and a fierce commitment to love.

Creating that kind of space is one of the most sacred acts we can perform for each other. When we do it, we stand on holy ground. And we can't do it well unless we are well-grounded. We'll support ourselves.

For a better understanding of the journey through liminal space, look at the transformation of a caterpillar to a butterfly. Though this metaphor is not without its limitations (i.e., it's a one-time-only transformation that ends with more beauty than it started with, neither of which is necessarily true for humans), it has a lot of value as an analogy. In order for a caterpillar to fulfill its destiny as a butterfly, it must first surrender to, and pass through, the liminal space of the chrysalis phase. Though I've never cut one open, I'm told that inside the chrysalis is a gel-like substance that resembles neither caterpillar nor butterfly. It's liminal: empty, void, expectant. It's complex—both pleasant and claustrophobic, comforting and frightening. It's dark and enclosed, but also warm and secure.

It's also absolutely necessary, because the transformation to butterfly cannot happen without the void of the chrysalis in between.

Below is a whimsical little story, "Let Go of the Ground," that may help you to understand the butterfly's transformation.

## Let Go of the Ground

"How do you get to be so free?" Caterpillar asks wistfully of Butterfly.

"Surrender," Butterfly whispers as she flutters by.

"But ... I've read all the books, taken all the classes, and I just can't seem to get off the ground."

"Surrender."

"What do you mean, 'surrender'? Surrender to what?"

"To the Mystery. To your Creator. To your own DNA."

"How do I do that?" Caterpillar frowns.

"Climb up in that tree, let go of the branch, and spin."

"Spin?"

"Spin."

"I don't know how to spin. Do I need to take a course? Is there a manual?"

"I'll know. Once you're up there on the branch."

"I know? How will I know?"

"It's written in your DNA."

"What happens next? Do I have to spin my own wings?"

"Oh, silly," Butterfly giggles. "You spin a cocoon."

"A cocoon? I've never heard of that before. What do I do with it once I've spun it?"

"I don't do anything. You just wait. Inside the cocoon."

What good does waiting do? I have too much work to do to sit around waiting in a cocoon. I have housework to do and laundry to feed and ... well, that's just ridiculous." Caterpillar looks away, her eyes back on the ground.

Well, then you'd better give up your dream of flying, because that's the only way to get up here." Butterfly's wings carry her a little higher.

Caterpillar glances back at the sky. Her eyes fill with tears. "I really want to fly. Can you tell me a little more? Please. What comes next?"

"The hard part. The surrender."

"So we're back to surrender again. That doesn't seem very helpful. And it's kind of confusing. What am I surrendering?"

"Everything you ever knew. Every cell of your body. Every story you've ever told yourself."

"I have to give up EVERYTHING?! Isn't that asking a bit much?"

"Yes, but it's worth it."

"Does it hurt?"

"Oh yes. It hurts."

"How do you handle the pain?"

"You won't like the answer."

"Tell me anyway."

"Surrender. And trust. You have to surrender to the pain and trust the process. You have to give up control and let your body turn to an ugly, goopy, mushy substance while you wait for transformation to happen. Your friends—those who haven't learned to spin yet—will turn away because they won't recognize you. It will be the hardest thing you'll ever have to do."

"I don't know if I can do it. I can't handle that much pain."

"You can."

"But... "

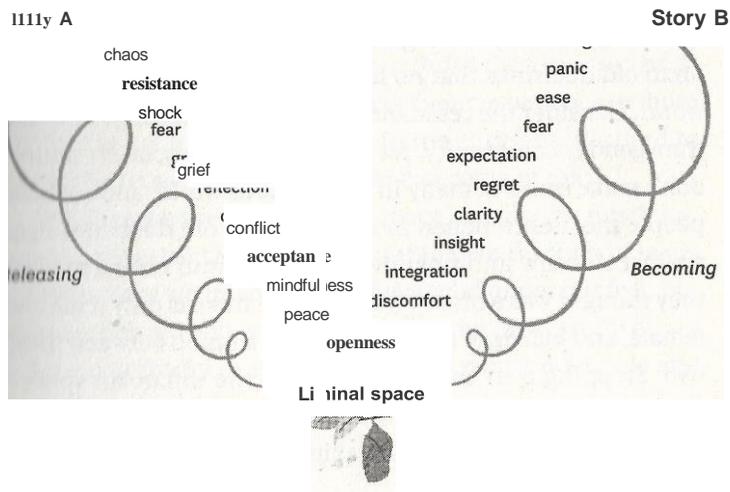
"Do you want to taste the sky?"

"Oh yes. I really, really do."

"Then you have to let go of the ground."

FIGURE 1 is a diagram I developed to help us better understand the journey through liminal space. In the diagram, you'll find that the passage through liminal space is never linear or direct. Instead, it's a *spiral* pathway through a complexity of emotional states and experiences. (In truth, I am even more confused by the path of the labyrinth, with its way of moving you directly to the destination and then, with a simple turn, taking you far away from where you think you're meant to be. But it's harder to demonstrate in a two-dimensional image.)

FIGURE 1. THE JOURNEY THROUGH LIMINAL SPACE



The first spiral is the "releasing" (or, as suggested in the caterpillar story above, the "surrender"). It's a time of letting go, of admitting we do not have control of the outcome. There is much resistance in the releasing. It's a time when we fantasize, with fondness, of the way things used to be. Weren't things simpler back then? Wasn't I happier? Can't I go back and reclaim what once was?

A person can get stuck in resistance and spend much of their life there. They can also be influenced by leaders and friends who want to keep them stuck. (The forty-fifth president of the United States speaks to those resisters when he promises to "make America great again.") A resister doesn't want the world to change, even if there is significant evidence that it needs to.

Beyond being a path that individuals get stuck on, there are also institutions-and even countries-that resist evolution. Consider the religious organizations, for example, that hang on to old doctrines that no longer make sense in the modern world. Consider the resistance to same-sex marriage or to the transgender community, for example; these social structures don't make sense to many in the religious world, and so those people most entrenched in the religion's old doctrines fight against the new and unknown. They want to return to what they thought was a binary world, where there is only male and female, and marriage is defined only as a union between these two. Stepping over the threshold into the unknown space-where gender is a spectrum and love has no limitations-feels like giving up your caterpillar skin without knowing that butterfly wings are possible.

No, surrender is not easy. It can be a time of chaos and conflict, shock and grief. We risk a great deal of loss when we surrender. We may lose important relationships with people who don't want to see us change. We may lose status and

influence within our community. We might have to walk away from jobs that no longer feel right, or we might even get fired and no longer accepting the status quo.

I recently listened to a podcast where a few pastors who'd lost their faith were being interviewed. At the time of the interview, these pastors (who were speaking under cover of anonymity) were still leading their faith communities but speaking from the precipice of things in which they no longer believed. They'd stepped into their own personal liminal space but hadn't yet "come out of the closet" with their truth, because the people they led wanted them to stay where they were and offer a comfortable, familiar faith.

These pastors expressed the anguish of the positions they found themselves in. They loved the work of leading and counselling their congregations-it was the only work they were trained to do. But they were no longer teaching from a place of integrity.

Those of us who've stepped over the threshold into liminal space can understand some of the anguish these pastors must have experienced. It's hard to speak of your experience to those who have not yet found themselves in the chrysalis. It's hard to talk about the risk-and the loss-that can come of that.

The time we spend in liminal space can also be much longer than we expect or want. We want to rush through it, to get to a place where the ground feels solid under our feet. But rushing through will only short-circuit the process. If you try to force a butterfly to emerge before it's ready, it will die and you won't discover the beauty of flight.

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*It's time to allow ourselves to be drawn out of business as we are and remain patiently on the "threshold" (limen, in Latin) where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the newly unknown. There alone is our old world left behind,*

*while we are not yet sure of the new existence. That's a good space where genuine newness can begin. Get there often and stay as long as you can by whatever means possible.*

RICHARD ROHR

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My most significant period of liminal space came after I lost my stillborn son. Before that time, I had a stable, rather predictable life. I had a good job and was rising through the ranks of the federal government, on track to eventually reach the highest level of public service as an executive director. I had two young children, a house in the suburbs, a church community, and a trailer that we parked by the lake each summer. I had all the things that feel solid and comfortable. I was in the "caterpillar on the ground" portion of life.

But then my life was thrown into chaos when my third pregnancy was suddenly at risk. I had to spend three weeks in the hospital trying to prolong it so that my child would have a better chance of survival. During that time in the hospital, my faith and everything I believed in underwent dramatic and irreversible change. I emerged three weeks later with no baby and a huge question mark where my belief system had once been.

Those three weeks were hard, but they taught me so much about surrender, trust, and stillness. And in that time I was offered a hint of a different kind of life, a life based on open-heartedness and purpose. Though I didn't call it that at the time, it was in my hospital room that I first became a life coach and spiritual guide. I sat and listened to people in a different way than I ever had before. And while I was listening, I was learning to hold space.

I spent the next ten years trying to find solid ground again, trying to find the life's purpose that I'd glimpsed in the hospital.

If I had government and took a non-profit job that sent me to the poorest parts of the world. I began exploring different spiritual teachings and discovered the labyrinth, meditation, and the Circle Way. I eventually left the church I had once sustained me and, at the end of those ten years, I finally walked away from the marriage that hadn't evolved into the new paradigm in which I was now living.

In my relationships, I spent a great deal of time in loneliness. It was painful and chaotic and scary. But when I started down the path, I knew I couldn't go back. And knowing that was both deep inside and far ahead of me kept me going. I know it would all be worth it.

Although I've offered the above diagram to describe the path through liminal space, it's important to note that its complexity goes far beyond what any diagram can offer. If it were fully accurate, the diagram would include many smaller paths layered on top of the larger one. For example, while many of us find ourselves in a significant transition mid-life, there are often multiple journeys under way, each of which qualifies as its own liminal space within that period of transition.

In my ten-year spiritual quest after losing Matthew, for example, I went through multiple transitions. Two years after Matthew died, my dad died very suddenly in a farm accident. A few weeks later, my uncle died. And two months after that, my grandmother (and last remaining grandparent) died. It felt as if my family was going through a season of death. Each time we caught our breath, the phone would ring, and we'd know of another passing.

My work also transitioned during this time. The year after my dad died, I left the federal government and started my own non-profit. Six and a half years later, I left that job to start my new business. Each of these experiences represented another

journey through liminal space, overlaid on a more extensive ten-year quest.

Perhaps we go through some version of the liminal space journey-both personally and in our communities and families-throughout our lives. And in the end, there is one inescapable journey we must all take: the journey from life to death.

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*Most of us arrive at a sense of self and vocation only after a long journey through alien lands. But this journey bears no resemblance to the trouble-free "travel packages" sold by the tourism industry. It is more akin to the ancient tradition of pilgrimage-"a transformative journey to a sacred centre" full of hardships, darkness, and peril.s*

PARKER PALMER