'Change is Boundaries Dissolved': Exploring the Process of Transition[1]

Jean Clark

SYNOPSIS

When Jean Clark's marriage ended in 1985 she left behind home and work and moved to another city to build a new counselling practice. For three months she experienced how it felt to be 'homeless and unemployed' at the age of 60. In 1988 she gave a talk to a small group of people at the Norwich Centre about what her experiences had taught her about transition – 'the space between in a process of change'. People asked for copies; and to date, some 1,900 booklets have been re-printed. Therapists regularly order copies to give to clients, who often pass them to a friend. This article is a version of the first part of her paper.

'A better word for it'

We speak about managing change, but I believe that external change can only be satisfactorily lived through when we acknowledge the internal process. For me this means finding maps – not to tell me which road to take, but to show me the terrain as others have experienced it, and perhaps to be aware of the areas marked 'Here be dragons'.

'I wish there was a better word for it', said a friend to me one day. She was in fact talking about the pain and loss she was experiencing after the break-up of her marriage. People insisted on talking about 'mourning' and 'bereavement', but for her, these words were not appropriate. In fact they were positively unhelpful, as they didn't encapsulate her experience. She needed a special word for her time of transition, but there didn't seem to be one.

I had a similar problem when I was trying to name this article. I knew that what I wanted to explore, to find words for, was something like 'the space within the process of a transition', and in the end I used a line from some verses I once wrote, 'Change is Boundaries Dissolved'. The poem came at a time when I was struggling with the risks of making major changes in my life. A time, I now recognise, when I was very afraid of moving into that transitional space. It is a series of images of the place between, the place for which I had no name:

Change is boundaries dissolved
space unlimited reaching stars
Change is water
flowing under bridges
Change is being lost in strange
unreadiness to end or to begin
Change is fear of things unknown
Approaching
Change is mourning for things ended
regret for things undone
now never to be known
Change is challenge
to begin anew
a letting go, renouncing, moving on
to find an unpredicted life
now shaped

I did eventually trust myself to the 'water flowing under bridges' and crossed over into my personal unknown territory, and for a long time now I have wanted to reflect on the clues, the elusive images that seem to have given me some maps of the terrain. I realised too that, as a therapist, I was often with clients when they were lost and incoherent in a process of transition, and I wanted to see how I could be with them more fruitfully.

'The Place Between'

I am not searching for theories, because change is a very mysterious space:

> Do not ask for explanation
> when we meet upon the way
> I am incoherent in my experience
> I am in myself, but secretly
> there are no words to impress your mind
> I cannot link meaning in a rational way
> Only to say 'see who I am,
> there is meaning in my mystery'

Journeys have always fascinated me, unexpected journeys and journeys made to new places; and as I looked back over my life I begin to see some of the clues to the mystery of 'the place between'. There was a Saturday at the beginning of September 1939, when my parents and I were on holiday, and war was imminent; and because we lived in London and there might be bombing, my parents decided to leave me with a family we had just met at the boarding house. I still remember how it felt, standing at Cromer station waving goodbye to my parents; being in a space between the known and the unknown. Later that day I journeyed with these strangers to Cambridge, a place where nothing was familiar. It was while I was living with this family that I discovered and devoured books of Antarctic exploration, of Scott's journey to the South Pole; those archetypal journeys into the dangerous unknown.

Then six months later, another major, life-changing journey. I was now back in London with my parents, because there had been no bombing. One Friday night, my father came home from work and said to my mother, 'We are going to have to shut up the house and move to North Wales next Wednesday, for the duration of the war'. I do not recall the process of packing – but I do remember the journey, the long nine-hour train ride to an unknown country, where I was to discover that people spoke a different language! And I remember the brief space of time when my mother and I sat on our suitcases on Colwyn Bay station platform looking at the sea, while my father went to find where we could stay that night. That moment of being utterly between experiences has always remained vivid in my mind.

And I remember sitting beside my father in a large saloon car on the way to my wedding.

And I remember the two or three hours before my first child was born, when I was wife and not yet mother.

I can see and feel how it was on those particular journeys, but there have been other times of transition which were less clear, when I was aware of loss and chaos, depression, fear and excitement, and a deep sense that somewhere in it all, there was something of great value to be discovered. Gradually the search became more conscious; there was a journey to be made from the known to the unknown by way of a time and space that seemed to have no words. And I was aware sometimes of clues.

'An Unmarked Path'

In 1971, when I became a student counsellor, it was a fairly uncharted profession. Looking back, I recognise that very soon I fell into a crisis of identity as I moved from the roles of wife and mother, working intermittently and part-time, to full-time creator of a counselling service in a large Polytechnic. For a while I was very lost indeed. I was in a kind of limbo. As a student from Yorkshire said one day of his own journey, 'it's like crossing the moors by an unmarked path when the mist is down'. It was about a process of inner change as I made this transition; certainly it was a journey, but I too was in a mist, and could not find a map that made sense to me.

Some years went by. I wrote poetry that I did not really understand:

> It is strangely different
> the familiar journey
> grey fog swirling
> time shifts and swings

Then, one day I picked up a novel by Morris West, called *Summer of the Red Wolf.* One of the characters spoke some words that leapt out of the page and have accompanied me ever since. The hero is walking on the Appian Way, outside Rome, and somehow everything is stale and unprofitable, when he meets a chance acquaintance, a doctor, who says to him that sometimes a man sees everything so clearly that he becomes blind and sees nothing at all. 'It's time to go then', McKenzie says, 'time to pick up the pilgrim staff and take the road... to the place of unknowing ...A place where you are strange and a stranger and lonely, and because of that, perhaps afraid'.

'The place of unknowing', the phrase was numinous; it was one of the milestones on the map of my unknown country. It told me what I already sensed, that there would be

transitions in my life, when I would be lonely and afraid. But clearly others had been there, and that was some comfort.

In unexpected places other clues emerged. Because in the 1970s I worked as a student counsellor in a multi-racial city, where some of my black and Asian student clients were victims of prejudice, I became very involved in questions about cross-cultural counselling, and about the culture-shock endured by immigrants to my city, and the racism they suffered. I began to work in this arena, and faced a quite shattering sense of culture-shock myself, as I moved from my safe, white, middle-class working environment at the Polytechnic out into the challenge and confrontation and conflict of working alongside black people, some of whom became colleagues, as we developed training strategies to combat racism in institutions. I was afraid, yet excited, lost and insecure. I was in a strange country between two worlds, where I now did not know the rules, and I was slowly learning what it would truly mean to live in a multi-cultural society. I recognised, too, that when I step outside of the established order, when I begin to challenge how things are, then I may become alien.

However uncomfortable a place it was, the experience of culture shock was potentially creative and growthful, if it could be fully lived through.

Another piece of the map emerged when a booklet came through the post from the Guild of Pastoral Psychology, the transcript of a 1982 talk by Bani Shorter (Shorter, 1981). My place of unknowing began to have images. She was suggesting that a life change, a transition, is like a border crossing between two countries, one familiar and the other not yet reached. Part of being human is that, although we may not want walls, we still create them, or they are built for us. We tend to respect them and may live most of our lives within them, in our own familiar territory. Perhaps because it often feels dangerous to feel exposed and vulnerable, we stay within our walls, rather than taking the risk of experiencing a world outside. From the beginning of our lives we are defined by others and by society, and perhaps we are not anyone or anywhere until we can acknowledge and claim our identity for ourselves. Is this 'the journey to the place of unknowing', the quest for our unique identity?

Sometimes we feel compelled to go beyond our walls, our borders, our limits. We abandon our secure job, or some traumatic loss occurs. We are cast out into limbo, and must dwell there for a while, until we again move to a place where we create new boundaries of who we are and where we might be, but with wider perspectives about what is possible.

So a life transition is like a journey from one country to another, from one kind of identity to another. From a country that is familiar, where we know our roles and status, we must cross over into no-man's land, where our passport is outdated and we have currency that now seems of little value.

A professional man, has become redundant and unemployed.
A wife becomes a widow.
A husband-and-father becomes a man on his own, because his wife has left him.
A fit, active person loses a limb in an accident and becomes disabled.

For a time we are in a border territory between the known and the not-yet known. At frontiers we may feel powerless as our passport of identity is scrutinised, our luggage opened and searched and some things may be confiscated. We are no longer in control. Our laws and language may be of little use. Fear flickers. I could be lost in this place. I may never recover my identity. 'At the border we are exposed to two conflicting pulls; we want to stay behind but we are also prompted to leave and to arrive' (Shorter, 1981: 7).

I was once travelling with a rucksack in Switzerland. I had put my pack in the left luggage at Scheidigg Station below the Eiger, and with a small pack on my back and my papers in an inside pocket, I set off alone to climb to the foot of the Jungfrau glacier. I walked for two or three hours and was coming back down. I stopped and took bread and cheese out of my pack and then realised that my jacket pocket was unfastened and empty – and one of my few phrases of useful German leapt to mind: 'Ich haben mein passport verloren'! I panicked as I visualised retracing my steps; I would never find my passport on the mountain slopes. I would not even get a bed for the night if I could not establish my identity. For a terrible 15 minutes I faced it all. I was in my own 'no-man's land'. I needed a drink of water, I reached into my pack, felt something oblong and hard, and there it was – my passport. I still remember how my hands shook as I drank schnapps with coffee at the station buffet. I had been alone and lonely and very afraid.

Jung wrote of the border country, that the person 'is in process of becoming another but suffers imbalance because there is no longer purpose and significance in the former state. He has been uprooted from meaning, the logic of his soul, and consequently his life is in chaos without the ordering principle' . I wrote my own description of the territory:

Limbo is the place where
there is no certainty of outcome
no point of reference
no expectation
that there are signposts
even a road . . .
Limbo is where nothing can be predicted
the hand that may or may not reach out

the word that may or may not be spoken
the life that may or may not be lived

I was writing then about the ending of my marriage, but the words well describe the feelings of deep uncertainty which can occur for those stepping out into some major life change, where there is 'no certainty of outcome', where one is still upon 'the frontier between two worlds'. In transition we step across a threshold, a limen, and once we have taken this step we are in a state of limbo, of *liminality*.

It was Jung's insight that the crossing of the border was to do with initiation, and here I come to another set of images, and to the word for which I had unconsciously been searching. It appears to have been Van Gennep and Victor Turner, both anthropologists, who expanded the meaning and function of the word liminal and created the word liminality. The Random House Dictionary (1986) gave a very significant definition of liminal: '*of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process*'. Victor Turner, in his book *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*, also uses and gives a rich meaning to the word 'liminality', which further clarified my search.

Liminality is the second and central stage in a process of initiation, in the sequence: separation, liminality and re-integration. We have few clearly defined rites of passage in our society, apart from baptism, weddings and funerals. In the stages of our growing (up), at puberty, or mid-life, or dying, or in the changes of status which occur in widowhood, divorce, redundancy or retirement, there is no recognition by ritual that marks out the stages and process of the transitions. They are assumed to be rational, private processes.

But if we look at rites of passage in traditional societies, we find there are three stages in the rituals which are lived out by initiands:

1. Separation from the familiar. A group of young men or young women are literally led out of the village, away from the tribe, having said their farewells. It is clear that today a phase of life has ended.
2. Living for a period of time on the margin, beyond the boundaries of the village, a period of liminality, prior to some ceremony of initiation into a new status.
3. Re-integration: returning to the tribe changed, their new status acknowledged, accepted, valued.

Crossing the threshold into a state of liminality can be experienced as being in a tunnel where things are dark and hidden. I am reminded of the Greek mystery religions and the descent into the dark cave, and the dark night of the soul, and my clients who talk of being in a black hole. 'The state of the liminal becomes ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification; he passes through a symbolic domain that has few or none of the attributes of his past or the coming state' (Turner).

Looking back at my own experiences of liminality – I recall fear and excitement, desolate loss and potential gain, inertia and exhaustion; yet freedom, a sense that it was never like this before, and it never will be again, the 'space unlimited reaching stars' of my poem. I sense that many recently qualified counsellors will recognise these feelings. A training course tends to change one's life in profound ways – there is no going back – and the way ahead is unclear, ambiguous and fraught with possibilities.

In the liminal state of a rite of passage, the symbols indicate that the initiate is virtually invisible in terms of their culture's classifications. They are stateless and set aside from the main arenas of social life. It is so in our culture. A client having a breakdown said he felt he was invisible to his employers; a woman newly separated from her husband finds she is *persona non grata* in some social settings – she is unlikely to be invited to dinner parties with couples for some time. Initiates have been reduced in status to equality with fellow initiands, regardless of their pre-ritual status, and it is in this space of liminality that a spontaneous expression of comradeship and equality can develop. On a training course, a doctor, a housewife and mother, a lawyer, someone made redundant and still unemployed, a psychology graduate, can come together unencumbered by status. ...

If you would like to read part two of 'Change is Boundaries Dissolved', please email: jeanclark26@btinternet.com

Jean Clark has lived through times of extraordinary change, with a sense of adventure and curiosity. Married, with two children, she was appointed first student counsellor at Leicester Polytechnic in 1971. When her marriage ended, she moved to Norwich, creating an independent therapy practice. She is now a great-grandmother and writes poetry about ageing (see book reviews section). Jean edited *Freelance Counselling and Psychotherapy: Competition and Collaboration* (Routledge, 2002).

Notes and References

1 An earlier version of this article was published in my edited book *Freelance Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Routledge, 2002), forming part of Chapter 7, 'The loneliness and freedoms of change'.

Shorter, B. (1981) 'Border people', London: Guild of Pastoral Psychology, Lecture 211.