

Living the Liminal: The Pervasiveness of Liminality in the lives of Independent Co-Creatives.

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Abstract.

This paper speaks to the pervasiveness of liminality in the lives and in the practice of independent co-creatives (ICC's); by which I mean management and organisation consultants who practice independently, and prefer to work with clients on the emerging process rather than adopting an expert positioning. This professional group often style themselves as change agents, drawing on metaphors such as 'surfing the edge of chaos' to convey the essence of their practice.

The genesis of this paper traces to my doctoral research completed between 2004 – 2008. This research involved a process of conversations between myself as ethnographer and twenty three ICC consultants whom I had known in a variety of contexts over a thirty year period. The purpose of this inquiry was to discern common threads of ICC practice through these grounded conversations; one strong common theme to emerge from the totality of these conversations was that of 'liminality.' This theme related not only to the heart of ICC professional practice but also to a central quality in the nature of ICC's wider life-course.

I struggled at first with knowing how to represent this inquiry. After trying out a variety of structures, a fortuitous conversation with one of my research participants on the subject of representing liminality – by definition a slippery, elusive subject – revealed that an apposite way to represent my findings would be to extend this naturally occurring conversation into an artifice that would seek to incorporate the various characteristics of liminality revealed during the research. This conversational artifice mimics my discovery of the phenomenon of liminality; and then through the ensuing dialogue between researcher and research participant seeks to explore emerging themes relating to the liminal.

Without pre-empting the emergent nature of the paper itself, themes revealed include

- The elusiveness of the liminal – so difficult to define or pin down
- The ubiquity of the liminal in the lives and practice of ICC's.
- Exploring the boundary between lyricism and restraint
- The threshold between public and private lives, and between work and home, as applied to both the consultants and the clients lived experiences
- Personal and professional transitions
- Authenticity and consistency with personal values at the threshold of organisational change.
- Smooth discourses versus disruptive interventions, planned and otherwise
- Manufacturing the liminal as professional brand identity – the semiotics of liminality
- The boundary between metaphor and geometry in organisation change
- Threshold conditions for the emergence of gestalts, and of synchronicities
- The limitations of using liminality as a lens for exploring social phenomenon

At some level this paper could be understood to comprise a 'beginners guide to liminality.' The dialogue assumes that beyond some understanding of process and change consultancy, it does not assume specialised knowledge. It does seek to illustrate the struggle entailed in researching and representing the liminal, in addition to the struggles involved in making a living on the edge; or more properly on 'the edge of other's edges.' The paper also highlights the tensions attached to professionalising liminal practice, where the strain between 'metaphor and geometry' often becomes acute. It is a working world that abounds in paradox and contradiction; with ambiguity and no little anxiety as it tests its capacity for 'negative capability.' It also reveals ICC professional practice as being imbued with a fair dose of self deception as well as a fair degree of self-aggrandisement.

While this paper (already written) might well be of interest to conference, then so might an account of putting the research together, and then of weaving it into the form of representative dialogue that seeks to capture the voices of twenty three respondents, including the authorial voice. It struck me that the deeper I delved into the lives of ICC's, the less familiar they became; in some ways the more improbable, the more inexplicable they became also.

This paper had as its origins my autoethnography where I was undoubtedly using myself as instrument, and I was not reticent in sharing my auto- ethnographic findings with my respondents, which unlocked deep levels of self disclosure in turn from them. There are of course ethical sensitivities attached to such an approach and I would be happy to share some of that experience of co-creation of text with conference, should you be interested. While in the process of creating this doctoral work I was experiencing a deep personal liminal experience as I transitioned from change consultant towards academic. In fact in the end the doctorate was entitled 'On becoming an academic.'

The Pervasiveness of Liminality in the lives of Independent Co-Creatives.

Christ made a trance one Friday view
And he made it with his own hand
He made the sun clear all off the moon
Like water on dry land

Like water on dry land man Christ
Who died all on the tree
What shall we do for our Saviour
As he has done for we

What'll we do for our Saviour man Christ
Who died all on the road
We'll do as much for him man Christ
Who shared his precious blood

The holly points her head to Heaven
To show her berries red
The drops of our Saviour's sweet blood
On Calvary were shed

Christ made a trance one Friday at noon
He made it with his own hand
He made the sun clear all of the moon
Like water on dry land

Three drops of our sweet Saviour's blood
Were shed on Calvary
Fell down on the precious grass O lord
Like the leaves fall down from the tree

Oh Hell is deep and Hell is dark
And Hell is full of mist
What'll we do for our Saviour man Christ
As he has done for us.

Martin Carthy (2006)

I discovered this song while in South Africa in February 2007, alone in Cape Town while I worked on the finishing of my PhD. I found it on a CD which had been little played until that time; but as one of the few CD's that I had brought with me, I found myself playing it repeatedly, and being captivated by it. This song is about liminality. It is about a place between life and death, which at that time in South Africa was significant, as I was listening to it on my father's birthday, and his life and death were

much on my mind. The song has I believe at its heart a theme of entrancement; a theme which resonates strongly with me at this time. As the song finishes, it trails off into nothingness. It brings to mind a conversation on the subject of liminality with a co-creative colleague, a version of which is captured below.

A Liminality Dialogue.

JANE: So what is up with you this fine day?

DAN: Well still busy with this research on Independent co-creatives, or as I have reduced that name to ICCs.

JANE: Oh yes wasn't that your fancy word for us management consultants?

DAN: In one sense yes. Though as I dug deeper I discovered that consulting was only one part of our portfolio, hence the change in nomenclature.

JANE: OK, though a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. And I don't feel ashamed of being a management consultant. So how is the research going?

DAN: Well it is going OK, but I do have a funny thing going on here, something that I don't quite understand.

JANE: No change there then, given the nature of your research. But go on, humour me, what is it this time that you don't quite understand?

DAN: Well there is a theme emerging, but it really is elusive, and I am not sure how I will ever express this theme adequately within the constraints of a regular PhD.

JANE: And?

DAN: Well it just seems to transcend so many of the other themes; it runs through the entire thesis. And the same theme also ran through the writing of my autoethnography, which if you remember was the precursor to the full PhD. This theme is everywhere and nowhere, something and nothing. It is really slippery. Though I must say, it gave me great confidence when I saw that Professor Andrew

Sturdy, a luminary in the area of consulting research, was coming to give a seminar at Bristol, and that his topic was this very one.

JANE: Well, would you like to put me out of my misery and give this mysterious 'everywhere and nowhere baby' theme a name please?

DAN: Oh ok then, but it will sound to you like psychobabble, I feel sure. I am calling it 'liminality'.

JANE: Oh what is that when it is at home? I have heard of subliminal, but not of liminality. Is it something to do with insidious marketing?

DAN; Well, it does have a relationship with the subliminal word. Subliminal means below the threshold, as in subliminal advertising, which sneaks in below consciousness, but has a powerful impact. Well liminality means to be on the threshold, on that edge, between waking and dreaming for example. Many describe it as being 'betwixt and between'.

JANE: Oh I see, I think I am beginning to get it. And beginning to understand why it might be important to us independent co-creatives to be aware of that notion. Come to think about it, it does seem to me that we spend a lot of our private and professional lives in some kind of twilight zone.

DAN: Well yes exactly. And the fact that you are getting it kind of immediately would confirm in a sense what I am talking about. I mean, we know it, quite intimately and intuitively, this liminality thing, and when it is mentioned to us, we get it. Or at least we have a sense of what it is, and are curious to know more. Whereas I have found that to those outside of our world this notion needs much explanation before they understand what it is, and how it works. They don't immediately get it, nor is there any reason why they should.

JANE: I am beginning to experience one of those Russian Doll sensations here, where you unpack one doll only to find another inside. What you said earlier about this theme being slippery. Does that mean that one minute you have it, only to find that the next minute it slips beyond your grasp? Well, what I am beginning to sense is that there is a strongly liminal feel to your inquiry into liminality! Ha!

DAN: Wow, yes, that is true; I had never quite seen it to that way before. My inquiry into liminality is itself subject to the liminal. Thanks for the insight.

JANE: Ok well I am pleased that I am on the right track. But I do need more examples to ground this slippery jellyfish of an idea. So tell me, how did liminality play out for you in the writing of your autoethnography?

DAN: Well if you remember my whole writing adventure started out, and was inspired by that painting that I recently saw and wrote to you about, 'Between Discipline and Desire'. That began the flow of thought about the importance of boundaries between things. That painting spoke to the balance between lyricism and restraint that I was endeavouring to discover and maintain in my writing. I wasn't immediately aware of the theme in the process of writing my life story, but it really began to push through when I was going through the painful process of deconstructing my personal text. Then, then it came back time after time, like an echo in a large cave.

JANE: So where was this liminality theme manifesting itself then? What struck you most about it?

DAN: Well as I look back it seems to me that much of what I was writing about was an exploration of the boundary between my private and public life. About the extent to which I allowed the personal to be referenced in my work, and the extent to which I manage, or rather failed to manage the work: life boundary. It is true that in my life I have jumbled up all sorts of boundaries. For example in my personal relationships there are examples such as my having some one as lover one minute, work mate the next. Or best friend one minute, then next as someone on the payroll. Or playmate, then next day client to whom I have a tough message to deliver. All distinctly messy.

JANE: Yes I well remember vividly those difficulties you have encountered. And I must say created for yourself, so I don't feel too sorry for you. I have had my own share of boundary confusion too, but you seem to have been through every combination of boundary blitzing imaginable.

DAN: Yup, it feels that way, and I do feel rueful about that. And it is not as if those collisions were inevitable. And yes they did feel like collisions at times, quite painful ones. And liminality is also about the relationship between the inner and the outer, as

much as it is about the personal and the professional. There is that which is public, out there, and that which is private, in here. I notice that we ICCs sometimes go to lengths to put that which is inside out there. It seems really important unignorable, that we share what is going on inside of us. And in the process we encourage others to do the same. Disclosure seems very important to us, we seem to have an almost religious belief in its confessional benefits.

JANE: Hang on .. Didn't you say that all of this writing of yours started through the merging of personal and professional diaries? Wouldn't that be an example of the liminal at work?

DAN: Yes you really are cottoning on here. That is what that was, I had never thought of that before. And another example of my need for personal disclosure.

JANE: Ummmm, it as if we need to work this stuff aloud, somehow, trying it on, working for some kind of resolution between the conflicts that we are well aware occur between the way we present ourselves to the world, and what we know really feeling and thinking inside of our trembling selves? The doubts agonies, gnawing irrational fears. And also the splendid and rather embarrassing hopes and dreams?

DAN: Well yes it is all about that. Why would we feel propelled to do that, to want to seek that harmony between what is out there, and what is in here? You can probably see how this connects to our previous conversation on faking it.

JANE: Oh yes I absolutely can. It is not only what we feel we need to put the authentic expression out there, even though the world might prefer that which is evidently false. It is simpler for every one that way. Yet we refuse to play that game often, or are deeply uneasy when we do. Yet the route we choose is disruptive, and often labelled subversive... isn't it often called subversive? It is on the threshold between truth and illusion, the one Alby talked about in his play 'Who's afraid of Virginia Wolfe?' Disrupting discourses. I think I am getting that. But do you have any more concrete examples of how this liminality thing works through, things I could see out there in the world that gives me some more clues as to the centrality of liminality in our lives?

DAN: Well yes if course. For a start, you just have to look at the names we give to our companies. My own 'Co-Development International' company, for example which

is meant to be suggestive of a co-creation impulse, on the threshold between client and consultant; Tom's 'Inter-Logic', which promises in its strap line 'effective co-operation across boundaries; Martin's 'Co-creation', which he attempted to get going with a bunch of co-creatives last year. Then there was Martin's older company, the one that was called after the Greek name for midwife. What was that word anyway? No wonder I can't remember the word, he had to change the name because no one could spell it. But the midwife image metaphor was interesting, the midwife spanning the space between life and earth. And there are others that spring to mind, 'EarthHeart', 'The Spaces Between', Tony's 'Metabridge', even 'Limited Nowhere'! At heart all of these names speak to a message of liminality.

JANE: Yes they do. I can see that. And beyond thinking of the arcane names of our companies I can think of the cliché of all those 'yin and yang' signs that used to proliferate as consulting logos. Maybe many of them are still around. When consultants would stand up at the projector beside the two nicely spooned light and dark frog spawn shapes and explain earnestly how their companies embraced both masculine and feminine qualities? Those were the days. Before Yin and Yang became a cliché.

DAN: Quite so. And if not masculine and feminine, then loose and tight, above and below, shadow and light. When we were all getting excited about 'paradoxical theories of change' in the Nineties, liminality was at the core of what we were trying to express, of how a trip to the 'dark side' can enlighten a diagnosis better than attempting to constantly improve the mess you are living with.

JANE: Doesn't this also connect with the metaphors we use to describe ourselves, those images of co-creatives? You know the ones. Shape shifters. Shaman, the ones who live at a distance on the edge of the village, able to see beyond the now, to bring the future into the present, to carry a glimpse of the vision. And also to know of the boundary with the past that we need to own to bring the present into the light.

DAN: Yes that is right, all of those images. And I can think of the other metaphors that have stickiness too. Those of the chameleon, perpetually changing shapes to match the environment around us. Or simply to disappear from view altogether, when the going gets threatening.

JANE: And there are those that rather more grandly pick up on the idea of 'magician', you know the one, the one that Bill Torbert really likes which is at the highest most developed end of leadership. Ah, you see liminality has been given academic respectability.

DAN: Yes it has. And Torbert's magician nests closely to the idea of the 'trickster', suggestive of how our development of others has a degree of slight of hand about it.

JANE: And if Torbert is the semi respectable side of things, didn't you say that through your research conversations with us that a guilty secret was realised, and for some not so guilty, that a favourite piece of reading among us ICCs in the Eighties was of Carlos Castaneda?

DAN; Yes I did indeed reveal that shameful revelation. Hope that I wasn't transgressing too many ethical boundaries when I did that. But Castaneda contains powerful imagines of the liminal; of the 'wall of fog', and of stepping between states of consciousness via the magical mushrooms he seemed to enjoy so much.

JANE: Yes that takes us into the sinister side of things. And were there not metaphors of co-creatives that were a little less glorified?

DAN: Yes indeed. There were those that come out of mouths other than our own, and they include the idea of the 'ventriloquist', where the consultant shapes and creates the words – or the bullets – for the client to deliver. Which also connotes with the image of the Rasputin, or of the Svengali, the power behind the throne.

JANE: Ahh so even in our living out of the liminal there is a degree of liminality. There is the extent to which we are in the light, or in the shadow. That piece on the company names and metaphors was helpful. How else might I get some kind of toehold, some purchase on this liminality notion?

DAN: Well I was aware as I deconstructed my story that another emergent theme was one of never really belonging. That was why I called my autoethnography 'An Outside View'. David Megginson gifted me with a wonderful Quaker quote by David Rack about 'being on the outside', some thing about being on the edge, and rather liking it there. At an early stage in my life I had had no control whatsoever over these

feelings of 'outsiderness', I just needed to learn the skills of transition and get on dealing with it.

JANE: It was a matter of survival? I had a sense of that in my early life too.

DAN: Yes that was it. Then later, it may well be that I discovered that this ability to be on the margins, and to commentate from the margin was a real skill. And I think as I became more comfortable with the margins, the more I sought out liminal life positions. If that makes any sense.

JANE: Yes it does. And you must have found, talking to all of us, that you were not alone in this?

DAN: Yes I surely did. For example, Adam talked of his coming to England from Australia at an early age, and getting the message that his Australian background must never be mentioned. He was required to be English, while carrying the knowledge that he was really Australian deep down. He talked of how some of this identity stuff took him over to Canada, to be with a Canadian partner, and now spending his time between Vermont and Wiltshire. His liminality became institutionalised. And if that is true for Adam then so too for so many of us, it has become a way of life.

JANE: The story you told me that struck home was that one about Tony, even at the age of 68, still not feeling at home. Having lived a life where he is too academic for the corporates, and too corporate, too businessy for academics.

DAN; Yes that is quite true, and I have felt strong resonances of that same phenomenon in my migration to an academic life from business. So often betwixt and between. Stalling between two fools as Stephen Fry would have it, in his infuriatingly clever way. Yet no one has put us there, no one is making us do this. We choose these liminal pathways for ourselves, often dragging not quite understanding partners with us. Or not.

JANE: What part do you think our values play in all of this to-ing and fro-ing? Is it that our need to seek the liminal drives our values, and that those values were shaped by early experiences? Or did there have to be something innate in there that causes us to value liminality?

DAN: Great question and one that has exercised me a great deal. When I think of the Schwartz typology, which I shared with you at our action research session during the summer, then I think that whether by nature or by nurture – and probably through a combination of the same – we have a decided preference for openness to change as being at the heart of our core values. And that valuing openness to change is bound to drive us towards experimentation, which means that we must be prepared to spend time in transitional states. And it is on those transitional states that we flourish.

JANE: So how does this propensity for the liminal work through in our co-creative practice, in the work that we do out there in the world?

DAN: Well I think that it is really important for the work that we do. Thinking back to our metaphors, one that earned repeated mentions in our discussions of our work was that of co-creatives as jazz improvisers, a method first given credence by Donald Schon, and probably given even more juice by Woody Allen, who has worked the parallel between his jazz and his film making. Only one of my discussants rejected to jazz idea, expressing a preference instead for fine orchestration and the need for a degree of planfulness.

JANE: What else did you learn about liminality in our work?

DAN: Well, it runs deeply through the work that we do, and just as importantly through the work that we are attracted to. Every one of us nodded when I shared the Frank Barrett metaphor of 'It begins with metaphor but ends in geometry'. None of us wish to be geometry merchants. We wish to stay at the metaphoric level, content to leave the geometry to others. In fact, we are distinctly gloomy about the inevitable drive to commoditisation of ideas that brings geometry and 'manualisation' in its wake through the creation of manuals and the inevitable shelf ware that clients say they want yet rarely look at.

JANE: So how does this jazz improviser hold her audiences attention, once on stage?

DAN: Well it is both on stage and off stage really. Rather disconcertingly in the mode of Van Morrison, the improviser is quite likely to bunk off mid-concert and leave the rest of the band to it. Maybe Van is the original co-creationist. But to return to your

question, what I think keeps the audience hanging in there is the ability of the orchestrator to be sensitive to the undercurrents of the mood of the audience and to know how to draw them in and draw them out. This is the providing of guidance in a journey through the liminal, where the facilitator understands very well the various segues, and folk enjoy being taken on the journey. It is rather like the monomyth, the Hobbits' journey, where they are taken out of the ordinary life as the first inevitable step in the saga, where the successful crossing of the first boundary is key.

JANE: And rather like the hobbits they would like to be delivered from this transcendent world in one piece?

DAN: Quite so. And that is not always quite so easy to achieve. But yes the theme is one of the journey into the unknown, and of confidence in the guide gained through her having been into the liminal before, if not into this particular experience of it.

JANE: I guess this explains why so many co-creatives refer in their work to the Kubler Ross grief curve or variants thereof, in their description of the transition process? Or to Bridges and his transition work?

DAN; Yes that is true. Many of my discussants mentioned these transition tools, both as tools as they are used in assisting others in their transition, but also as tools they used in reflecting upon and understanding their personal shifts.

JANE: Doesn't it need a special type of audience, one that is prepared to go through this journey? A different audience from one that would feel safer and more secure being delivered a commoditised product?

DAN: Well yes I think that is true. I am not sure that the whole audience needs to be attuned to the liminal in order to make the journey, but at least one or two do, in particular those that commission the work. Then, with a following breeze, it maybe that the rest are carried along and become engaged, though we also know that it doesn't take too many dissidents to stall the effort.

JANE: And once the audience is landed don't we need to have to know how to shift and move to keep with them and for them to keep with us? It seems to me that that this is where our chameleon comes into play, our ability to morph into whatever it is that the audience or an individual wants us to be at any moment in time.

D Yes, there is some of that, what the NLP brigade call 'matching'. But then to be effective the co-creative needs to 'mismatch' as well, to spot the liminal space then to throw the audience off balance. The IC needs to be counter-intuitive also, to catch them unawares.

JANE: Isn't it true from that we will often force or require the group or the individual to stay with the discomfort with the liminal until a new pattern begins to emerge?

DAN: Yes I think that is true. There are those in the consulting world who are all too ready to leap upon the next piece of uncertainty. In fact the commodity merchants often come with apparent certainty secreted somewhere on their persons, more often than not in flip chart and manual form. The co-creative will stretch out the liminal space once the fault line has been discovered. They do not sense that this transitional phase needs to be rushed through. In fact part of the Argyris style double loop learning process is for the client is to learn how to deal with uncertainty, and to know how to enter and to remain for a while in the liminal spaces.

JANE: Isn't that what Bill Bridges was saying about the neutral zone, about how to dwell in the spaces between? And how to help clients navigate, like the Israelites, through their equivalent of forty years in the wilderness?

DAN: Yes it does. And to do that, the co-creative does need to have experience of that place, in fact intimate knowledge of that space. He or she needs to know the wilderness terrain. This is the ability to stay with the indeterminacy that Hugh Wilmot speaks of. Individuals and group find that so hard to hold, and so many interventionists will offer them a seeming cop out, which in fact binds them further.

JANE: Where does this align with what you were saying about 'praxis'?

DAN: Well it has a lot to do with that. Praxis if you remember, as defined by Schon, is reflection in practice, as opposed to reflection on practice. To achieve that sense of praxis, and to draw others into it, the co-creative needs to demonstrate a high level of mindfulness, of the ability to be reflexive not just on self but on what is all around. It is quite a trick, yet so rewarding to develop in others once it starts to occur.

JANE: So much of it has to do with timing, doesn't it, with an element of luck? And perhaps with that mystical conjunction, with that synchronicity that you mentioned, and that I am still not quite sure about??

DAN: Yes, at a superficial level synchronicity would seem to be to do with good fortune, and it is certainly about timing. I believe that an understanding of and a sensitivity to the liminal has a strong relationship with synchronicity. My thinking is now turning towards the idea that synchronicity can only be invoked, or exist when the attention is on the liminal, on the space between the words. Charlie Parker suggested that music is best understood through the space between the notes. And Foucault too in his post modern way reminds us of the need to look at the space between words, and to be aware of the sheer inadequacy of word to express what we mean.

JANE: So it would not be possible to invoke synchronicity while our attention is upon the fixed notion, or the fixed object? That reminds me of the gestalt stuff, Fritz Perls idea that we need to allow our attention to drift, where concentration is not forced but is in a state of aliveness, where the new foreground object or understanding emerges naturally from the swirling confusion, if we hold the boundary well. So that would certainly create the conditions where synchronicity might manifest itself. When we are in a state of mindfulness.

DAN; Ah yes mindfulness, I seem to be hearing a lot of that of late, on my travels through the shires. My supervisor's wife, a therapist, is now running programmes in mindfulness, and Susi Lennox has been talking about it for quite a while. Nigel, whom I wanted to get to speak to in one of these conversations but we didn't make a date stick, has long combined a career in management consulting with a deep and public commitment to transcendental meditation, which closely attaches to mindfulness. Incidentally Nigel most recent thinking defends the right to 'change your mind' which clearly has a strong liminal element. And is a deeply transgressive idea.

JANE: Yes it is. Shame you didn't get to speak to him further. Maybe he changed his mind about speaking to you.

DAN; Perhaps. You know, when you mentioned gestalt, I was thinking about my time at Bath Consultancy Group, and the work of Hawkins and Shohet, on counselling supervision, which took them towards the idea of shadow consulting.

JANE: As yes wasn't that the slightly spooky idea that the psychodynamics within the client system are played out within the mind and the emotions, and even the body of the consultant, at a somatic level? That a persistent pain in the neck every time you go in there means that the client has stiffness, an inability to turn around and see things differently?

DAN: Yes that kind of thing. Clearly that has a strong liminal resonance, where the subliminal dis-ease that is hidden beneath is brought to the surface. As had my recent conversation with Bill Critchley that surfaced the idea of paradoxical change.

JANE: Ah yes I remember that Bill made quite a name for himself with that idea back in the Nineties. I didn't know you had talked to him. Wasn't his background strongly in the gestalt tradition too, taking therapeutic ideas and working them on the management stage? I have tried it and it works, that notion of asking the client to dwell upon that which is in the shadow, rather than forcing everything to seem to be in the light. Again, I can see how that approach means valuing an exploration of boundary conditions.

DAN: Hmmmm it all seems to be coming together doesn't it, as a coherent practice that values the liminal, held together and worked by co-creatives that live and breath liminality themselves? As above so below. Yes that is right, but all is not quite rosy looking forward.

JANE: Oh how so? What is the trouble in paradise this time around?

DAN: Well let me ask you a question. When you think of your consulting work – which I know is not all of you life or your work – what are you noticing about the process of gaining and negotiating work?

JANE: God don't get me started on that one! It is becoming really difficult. You know how you were mentioning the liminal in the process of getting work? And the role of synchronicity in getting work, and building on the slender threads within the system taking folk with you as you approach Malcolm Gladwell's now immortalised tipping point? Well the entire process in being strangled by the relentless march of the procurement merchants, led in the van by the Department of Communities and Local Government?

DAN: So how does that cramp your style in practice?

JANE: Well almost totally in some cases. I do not have a machinery to answer full scale tendering processes in the first place, whether they be government or corporate. And once I am answering them they do seem to presuppose that the procurement advisor knows the answer, or if not the answer then the process to follow before the inquiry even starts. So if your primary approach is one of action research, then it is sounds really weak to say I like to keep it loose. There is no room for loose:tight qualities just tight:tight, which is where the consulting house battalions with their preformatted solutions, PowerPoint and slick sales people come marching in, confidently speaking procurement language yet signifying nothing.

DAN: So you feel that the psychological contract has shifted greatly?

JANE: Well I feel that the psychological contract may have been nearly annihilated, stuck in a strait jacket where there is little room for movement, and where we have to start to play games with our trusted client to get work. It may well be that research led process consulting as we know it might be dead in a few years time. Until the need for it to resurrected comes up again.

DAN: That would be a shame, but I have experienced the same, must say. One of my discussants, Elizabeth, was describing a recent case where she secured a completely open ended action research contract with the NHS, at a time when all else was strangled by procurement officers and ethics committees.

JANE: Well she was very fortunate then. I see it swinging the other way. Which I guess if you follow the logic, would mean that interventions that intentionally focus on the liminal will be driven out.

DAN: That could be true, but then I don't see the liminal going away somehow. And smart clients are going to be aware of the need to pay attention to it. But I do feel that the days of long exploratory open-ended contracts are probably gone. Gone the way of two week long in-company courses. In fact, the world has gone the other way unless the 'slow movement' would like to pitch its efforts to embrace us co-creatives.

JANE: Well they might do. And bring some of that fine food along in the process. So before liminality becomes extinct – and not as a result of global warming – what were you saying that academia was saying about liminality?

DAN: Well, I guess there is a lot being said, most notably Kristeva's ideas, who looks at intertextual space. The other work which may ring bells is that of Andrew Sturdy, who draws some beguiling insights into the function of dinners with clients as a twilight zone where the real work gets done.

JANE: Oh god those awful things. But then you kind of like them don't you Dan,. You were always a great schmoozer.

DAN: I did get some delight from them yes. What Sturdy says is that business meals mark a traditional, rather than modern, practice where 'official secrets' continue to grease the wheels of commerce. At the most senior levels especially, the liminality between work and private spheres can be far from unsettling and fluid. I would agree and interestingly he cites here the permeability of the private and work space. I remember one client who would only work on the golf course. And some others who would only do it over a beer or a long dinner.

JANE: Fascinating, so you academics are quite useful for something after all. Seriously tell me more about what the academics are discovering.

DAN: Well there is the work of Carl Rhodes, an Australian but in fact a frequent visitor to these parts. He was a consultant for McKinsey in Australia, so he knows all about life within the consulting battalions. He has worked extensively with Stuart Clegg a prominent critical management theorist. In fact come to think of it most of the work on consulting is of the critical variety. A key work is that of Tim Clark, his collection on 'Critical Consulting', he was the one invited me up to Durham, where I met with others including Pers Svennson who had the notion of consulting occupying the boundary between external and internal possibilities.

JANE: Didn't you say that the idea of an interruption was what kicked off your PhD really kicked it off on the first place. ?

Yes i did. That is why it fascinated me. And I know most of my good work has occurred when chaos is released, not control imposed. And as you seem to be

interested in this mini seminar, it may interest you that Clegg's work builds upon Barbara Czarniawska who works on the metaphor of liminality. She suggests that consultancy represents 'the liminal space', where the usual practice and order are suspended and replaced by new rites and rituals.

JANE: Oh is she where you got the idea from then?

DAN: Well in fact no she wasn't? My process has been much more random than that, I don't think that I am intelligent enough to go look for it systematically. I stumbled across it, and then I found her afterwards.

JANE: Well given that you academics are all busy stealing or tripping over each others ideas, where then did her ideas come from?

DAN: Well we don't steal and if you are interested, her ideas came from Victor Turner and Van Nepps, both anthropologists who are big into liminality.

JANE: Oh anthropology .. Isn't that all about rite of passage?

DAN: Give that woman the cigar! Yes it is, and aren't rites of passage all about liminality, about moving between spaces?

JANE: Yes I guess it is. And you folk in the management discipline seem to steal your ideas from anywhere and everywhere.

DAN: I guess we do. And do you know why that is? Because management is not a discipline in its own right. It is .. Yes you've guessed it right. It is liminal. It is interdisciplinary and multi disciplinary.

JANE: Oh dear, it looks like our time is running out, just as we were getting rolling here.

DAN: Yes it does. Tell me this has been fantastically useful for me. Where has it left you in terms of this liminality thing? I have been dwelling with the idea for a while but how does it leave you?

JANE: Maybe too early to say, but I feel it speaks to paradox and contradiction and how we live with paradox. We say we're independent but the fact is that we are highly dependent. We're very much dependent on the quality of relationship we have

both with our clients and with our data, with our colleagues, with each other internally. It allows us to co-create. And if we take all we say about the change occurring on the edge, then it would suggest that we need to be on that edge ourselves, on the margins. It is not as surprising that so many of us are loners and mavericks rather than joiners. We know how to join for a short while but the fact is that that doesn't always last and we find ourselves moving away perhaps out towards the boundary again, even to the boundary where we might meet another client system. Perhaps we are all nomads. Ahhh, didn't you have a company called Nomad once?

DAN: Well it never got off the ground. The strategy kept shifting from place to place.

JANE: Why am I not surprised! And how about that poem that you were always quoting about wanderers and searchers? Wasn't that liminal?

DAN: Oh that? The Cavanaugh thing? Well it has made it into this PhD.

JANE: Well I am glad to hear that. And now I really must leave to depart into the liminal hinterlands. Goodbye!

The End

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