

BOOK REVIEWS

Leaning Into the Liminal: A Guide for Counselors and Companions (2024). Edited by Timothy L. Carson. The Liminality Press. ISBN: 9798989164004

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Keywords: liminality, human suffering, life changes, death, war, recovery, trauma, threshold, transformation, sacred

<https://doi.org/10.59158/001c.116381>

Psychotherapy and Counselling Journal of Australia

Vol. 12, Issue 1, 2024

Liminality is a concept that straddles various domains of thought and practice. In the context of human suffering the concept has much to offer clinical practitioners who work with clients undergoing significant life changes. In *Leaning Into the Liminal: A Guide for Counselors and Companions* (2024a), editor Dr. Timothy L. Carson facilitates a range of voices exploring the meanings and uses of liminality. Carson is a pastor who completed his doctoral research on liminality and now heads the Liminality Project at the University of Missouri. The concept of liminality is treated in the text as a description of how people move through the disorientating passage from what is known, through unknowing, and into the new. Individuals traverse such passages when they experience key changes in life. Protocols for supporting this movement are a valuable part of the discussions in this book. The book is organised into sections dealing with liminality in clinical practice, recovery from war (including in Ukraine), spiritual direction, and dying. This exploration will be helpful to counsellors, psychotherapists, and practitioners who are unfamiliar with this liminal perspective on human experience. Some of the contributions to the book are tender and intimate in a way that supports a deepening engagement with these essential life transitions.

With this slim book, Dr. Timothy L. Carson, head of the Liminality Project at the University of Missouri, contributes another text to the discourse on liminal experiences. *Leaning Into the Liminal: A Guide for Counselors and Companions* (2024a) builds on the discourse that stemmed from Arnold van Gennep's writings of the previous century, which framed the concept of liminality and presented rites of passage as a composite of separation, liminality or threshold, and integration (as cited in Teodorescu & Călin, 2015). It outlines the development of liminality within this particular

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tradition of discourse and gathers different voices speaking to this understanding. The book is structured around four major sections, each with an introduction from Carson followed by contributions from other authors under the device “Case in Point”.

For those who may be unfamiliar with what liminal discourse offers, in my experience of providing counselling and spiritual companionship it is a potent way of recognising the process of change that can occur either for an individual or a community. The recognition of liminal journeys supports individuals to “companion” another fearlessly through the disorientating passage from what is known, through unknowing, and into the new. The book’s intended audience is counsellors and companions. Those who are new to the concept of liminality are likely to find this a helpful introduction. It offers a meta-perspective for understanding the process that clients, or those they are “companioning”, are undertaking.

In his introduction, Carson (2024a) establishes that the book arose from two big ideas:

The first is that the concepts and insights of liminality have much to contribute to the practice of the healing arts and its multiple disciplines of psychotherapy, counseling, chaplaincy, spiritual direction, and coaching. In this sense, the liminality model is pan-theoretical; it has multiple applications for many approaches. The second arose out of the mutual work of North American and Ukrainian teachers, trainers, and supervisors who are devoted to training and equipping mental health counselors in Ukraine. The scope of that work includes efforts to address war-related trauma. (p. ix)

As a reader, I found it helpful to bear this in mind, otherwise I might have questioned the inclusion or absence of different voices.

The first voice we encounter is that of Corie Schoeneberg (2024), who offers a personal and moving foreword that addresses these two big ideas. In it she articulates how this book supported her to make sense of her experience facilitating Zoom sessions with Ukrainian colleagues. In her own meaning-making concerning these sessions she clarifies that

for those of us who work in the business of significant moments like those that occur in counseling or chaplaincy, we must realize that we also work in the realm of sacred spaces, and it is the “ushering into” these spaces that we must facilitate before anything else. This is the heart of liminality. We must “cross the threshold” together with our clients, colleagues, and companions before any work can begin. (Schoeneberg, 2024, p. xiv)

As editor, Carson (2024a) has provided introductory guidance and framed the central themes of the book, his voice threading together the different contributions. His introductory chapter and his section on the work of the liminal guide clearly outline the potential of “leaning into the liminal” and what is required to make this possible. His commitment to providing safe and transformative space is articulated in a way that illustrates his own navigation of life questions:

Liminal time and space are disorienting. Compassionate liminal guides and mentors enter that space and walk alongside liminal persons. Guides bring the experience of having made their own dynamic life passages, so they notice, speak, and act as the initiated, ones who have done their own transformational work.
(p. 2)

Carson offers a transformative frame that is grounded and applicable. His section, “The Work of the Liminal Guide”, ends with pertinent questions such as: “How does one identify the thresholds that have been crossed? How does one describe the uncertain and ambiguous liminal domain? How is the conclusion of the liminal journey known and marked?” (Carson, 2024b, pp. 5–6). These are part of the book’s commitment to digest conceptual ideas so that they are practically applicable in the therapeutic context. I appreciate the inclusion of these questions. Over time, as I have gathered more experience in companioning, the power of considering his questions is clearer: to recognise the stages of the journey, to respect and acknowledge the in-between, and to celebrate the arrival.

The next section, titled “Communities of Practice”, draws on voices of therapists using different modalities. The first of these is Nicole Conner (2024), a narrative therapist from Australia. Other contributions to this section cover gestalt and play therapy modalities. Each outlines their modality and then demonstrates how the liminal can “invite people suffering from trauma to reclaim their lives, discover inherent strengths in a choice-filled manner, and embark on a journey of reintegration, healing, and growth” (Withrow, 2024, p. 21). Kate Weir’s contribution (2024) on play therapy articulates how clear protocols enable children to cross the threshold into the healing possibilities of a liminal space. She also reflects on the possibility for all therapists to “adapt the core concepts of the liminal model to their work” (p. 30).

In the subsequent section, “War, Trauma and Healing”, one of the most significant liminal experiences in the book is outlined. Once again, the reader is invited to engage with the two big ideas that generated the book. The first “Case in Point”, from Tetyana Ustinova (2024), a Ukraine-based psychologist, includes a tender recounting of her own experience of the horror of war. She also outlines the impact of war on female Ukrainian soldiers and the protocols being developed for a therapeutic process for them. Its pattern parallels van Gennep’s rites of passage: “pre-war preparation,

crossing the threshold into war, war itself, reaggregation out of war, and adjustment to the new reality of post-war life” (Ustinova, 2024, p. 42). A soldier’s passage through these stages is supported by liminal guides and requires “a strong communal presence throughout” (p. 42).

Another “Case in Point” in the section on war, by R. David Hammer (2024), outlines post-traumatic stress disorder and moral injury—common and devastating consequences of active military service. Hammer’s liminal approach considers the community contexts that affect recovery from wounds to the soul and spirit. Hammer highlights the consequences of moral injury when the combatant returns home to a society with no appreciation of what they have experienced, as has been the case for recent United States veterans. From his recognition of community as an essential part of recovery, he presents a carefully held process—drawing on Native American rituals, presumably with permission, although that is not made explicit—used with American veterans to create a circle of healing.

From war, the book turns to “Spiritual Direction”. Here, I appreciated Carson’s acknowledgement of the spiritual traditions that informed some of the ideas he presents in his introduction to this theme. By contrast, in the “Case in Point” segment, Nigel Rooms (2024) considers what it means to lean into the liminal and how to do this when providing spiritual direction; however, his piece commences with an assumption that his reader is theistic. His tendency here to centre his view, rather than locate his perspective, was disconcerting to me as a reader who is neither Christian nor theistic. In a predominantly Christian country such as the United States—where the book was published—this may be more contextually understood. So, this reservation applies to those of us in more secular societies such as Australia. Once this orientation became apparent to me, it explained the absence of voices from other spiritual traditions in which the liminal terrain is central to their discourse, such as in Buddhist practice, in which I am grounded.

The final section of the book is titled “The Final Passage”. It addresses death in war and the physical death that we all face. It also acknowledges the challenging death of our old ways of being. As Debra Jarvis (2024) reflects:

Liminality is about ambiguity, transition, and transformation. Death (in all forms) embodies these elements. It marks the end of life as we know it and the beginning of something different and unknown. Like other liminal experiences, death compels us to confront our mortality and question the nature of our existence. (p. 69)

This discussion on final passages offers some helpful suggestions for supporting others to navigate this essential terrain. However, other voices would have brought depth to this most central of topics. A case study of the profound spiritual work this primary liminal space offers would have enriched this section and supported others to appreciate its relevance further.

I recommend this book to counsellors and psychotherapists working with clients who are unfamiliar with this perspective on human experience, or to those interested in the intersection of the two central impulses of the book, liminality and war. Although it is not an academic text, a strength of this book is its use of footnotes and references. These provide a rich ground for further research exploration of the concepts discussed. Carson (2024a) best captures the transformative possibility of liminality for clinical work:

When liminal guides understand crossing thresholds and the nature of liminal space, their capacity to help liminal persons deepens. As opposed to simply returning liminal persons to previous states of equilibrium, they envision a future-oriented process, a passage of transformation. (p. 3)

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