

“Just do it”

Misreading *Nike*: Why liminal moments in theological reflection have to be so painful by Alan Niven

What occupies the space between theory and practice? We might call it reflection but I want to emphasize the liminal nature of this task which is at the core of ministry, discipleship, building Christian community, and which enables our faith to develop into a lifestyle.

A liminal moment in ritual is created when you separate yourself from the ‘known’, the group you were part of, or the state of being you were comfortable in, and participate in and perform a ritual action. Following this action we re-enter, are reincorporated into or rejoin whatever the social system was, but we are now different.

Pastoral theological reflection is ...

Such reflection is that liminal moment where you are aware of theory on the one hand, and you can feel the practice in your memory in almost a “body” way (for the senses and emotions are all there) yet you have suspended judgment because you have not yet allowed them to dance together to form something new - either a reframed theory or an amended practice. They must affect and inform each other.

It’s more than a cognitive-behavioural exercise because liminal space is the arena and playground for God and the space where ministry and Christian identity begin to form and firm up. It is the point where we are most accessible, vulnerable, open, resistantly receptive (the paradox I have used illustrates that we still have choices and God is not in the business of coercing us) or obviously wrestling with some new truth which is beginning to dawn. We may use prompts like:

“What’s going on for you now?” “What’s being challenged here?” “What might be behind the -- anger, pain, tears, clenched fists, quiet silence, smile, resigned sigh or whatever?”

These will be the instruments that sift, probe, dig, or scrape, in the liminal moments where theory collides with, or sneaks alongside, practice or vice versa.

There are potentially huge shifts within this liminal space:

Anger at the stubborn Elder can become the signpost towards a growing compassion for the old worn out paddock bull who (God forbid!) may just be as insecure as we are:

Assertiveness can be sown in the fertile ground of, surprise surprise, confessions of weakness and failure rather than strength;

The long, bitter curse of infertility may be reframed as the cross of vocational blessing.

Theological reflection therefore creates the space for grace where theory meets practice. Theological reflection tends to be intolerant of clocks, chronology and *chronos*. It is a place of *kairos* where timing is seen as appropriate and ‘at the moment’.¹ When clocks appeared on buildings in the 12th century we began to cheat people of their seasonal or *kairos* opportunities.

Chris, my wife, said last week: “Why couldn’t I have worked out what I’m working out now when I was 23? That’s a very understandable “*chronos* type” statement, (I’ve used it too,) which neglects the seasonal dimension. Students, ministers and Christians generally will often say, “That’s never bothered me before, why now?” This is an important question within a *kairos* framework.

Liminal moments of reflection between theory and practice are careless of timing because God is sensitive to *kairos*. “Just in time learning” can be a red herring because it is so often just about behaviour and practice being aligned with theory in a temporal sense and in a particular context. In other words, “What do I pragmatically need to learn now?” may not lead to a change in my ministry style or discipleship.

We may learn how to manage conflict but how do I manage myself in the midst of conflict? I might find out how to structure and implement a ministry review but how do I manage my response?

It may work - but for how long, and what if there are subtle changes in the context, or in me, and what will happen next time when the course or unit of learning is not available. In any case we are constantly traversing different layers and dimensions of experiences, systems and cultures. It may be useful one-off learning but, I would suggest that better practice per se in a situational sense is no substitute for reflective practice. Better practice is the logical partner and complementary fruit of the tough work that goes on in liminal space. It’s the difference between taking a shower (albeit necessary, delightful, and of great benefit for me and everyone else!) as opposed to learning to swim and feeling at home in the ocean with all its depth, colour, vitality, terrifying power and unpredictable passions.

Let me be more specific about what constitutes the essence of these liminal moments of theological reflection which stand between theory and practice.

1. An ongoing part of the ministry

One pearl may make a beautiful ring but a totally inadequate necklace. The string itself is the offer to us of this discipline and one pearl looks pretty pathetic on its own. A perverse part of me would still argue that it is still OK with God though. Maybe some of us just have a long gap between the moments when we add the pearls and our lifestyle reflects more accurately the challenges of the gospel.

¹ e.g. Galatians 4:4.

2. Ecumenical, hospitable and *kairotic* in emphasis

Gender, denomination, ethos, tradition, race, or century mean nothing.

Those liminal moments are filled with a great cloud of witnesses whom we welcome in as guests and as very strange bedfellows: Henry Nouwen, Julian of Norwich, Billy Graham, Merrill Kitchen, our children, Ghandi, Luther, John Wimber, our best friend, Abraham, Jesus or even our pets.

In liminal moments their writing, models, thought and insights appear “just in time” but because it is a liminal moment they become *kairotic*.

3. Embracing of pain

The Nike advert says “Just do it” but neglects to outline the years of pain and discipline that went into the ability to “just do it.” We can normalize pain but that is not enough. The integrity of the process of supervision and the skills of the supervisor must provide the necessary space and holding to make the pain potentially transformative for the student. As always, neither the process nor the supervisor are responsible for what the student, minister or Christian actually **does** with the pain.

4. Theological to the core

And all God’s people said - “Amen”!!! The text and stories of scripture will provide the very walls of this space and as F D Kerschner said about Thomas Campbell, we will breathe the air of the “consensus of consecrated Christian scholarship” and not some narrow sectarian or highly selective approach.

5. Eclectic in style

Sometimes these liminal moments with mentors, friends, elders or our own self-awareness, will seem like coaching, desert dwelling and utter desolation, growth counselling, spiritual direction, faithful companionship, mutual fulfillment or a wonderful meal around an enormous smorgasbord.

It is far better not to expect anything either in terms of process or outcome. Liminal moments must be left free to become what they will and, as noted above, a space for God to dance and play.

6. Accountable outside the liminal moment

These are not moments separated from the life and mission of the Church and the people within our local and wider community who represent the reason for it all. We take the insights of reflection and offer them humbly to the Church and the world and we understand that they may be accepted or rejected. True reflection means we will rest with either response. Arrogant new insights often become the coercive and dysfunctional patterns of tomorrow in the form of “God told me” or “this is my vision” assertions.²

7. Directed towards service

Eva Burrows, former General of the Salvation Army was awarded an Honorary Doctorate at the MCD Graduation service. As she outlined the rationale for her life in ministry she said, “To maintain your connection with God you must maintain your connection with the world. Lose your connection to the needs of the world and you will lose your connection to God.”³

Conclusion

Theory without practice is boring and irrelevant. Practice without theory can be downright dangerous.

Between theory and practice lie those liminal moments of reflection, theological at their core, accountable to the Church, eclectic and surprising in style, embracing of the pain of growth, and ecumenical, *kairotic* and hospitable at heart. You, and others who work with you, will know those moments by their fruit!

² Philippians 2:1-11.

³ Luke 4:18-19.