



Trauma, Liminal Space, and Beloved Community

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LIVING IN BELOVED Community¹ creates opportunity for powerful personal and communal transformation. Committed community living summons and focuses powers greater than the sum of the individual participants in the community. Intentional communal life can create liminal space at a breadth and depth that is not necessarily available in one-on-one relationships or in groups organized within power-over hierarchies. Beloved Community has a unique ability to invite us into the “real, deep, transformative conversation” that Richard Rohr writes about in his Introduction to this volume, “on the threshold between who we are and who we can become.” In our experience, this liminal space will often, if not always, be accompanied by trauma. Therefore, a willingness to face trauma,

that carried by others as well as our own, is necessary to realize the transformative promise of Beloved Community.

INTRODUCING BELOVED COMMUNITY

WHAT IS BELOVED Community? We like to say it is a community of intention. The foundational intention binding Beloved Community is this: to support one another in transformational practices. We use the Hebrew word *hineni* to mark this intention. *Hineni* means, “Here I am.” We understand it as also meaning, “Here I am, and I am ready to take responsibility for my life.” It is a word used by Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, and others to respond to their divine call. For Beloved Community, it means *showing up*, as fully and open-heartedly as we are able. This commitment to show up, to be present and hold space, is essential for the creation of liminal space in Beloved Community.

Fundamentally, we believe that Beloved Community is a community committed to facing and transforming trauma. This commitment includes the willingness to be informed, to witness, and to acknowledge the ways that we transmit our trauma. We use the word trauma to mean any time we are not in control. That experience often activates feelings of fear, confusion, disorientation, helplessness, and panic. In addition, the experience of being out of control can trigger self-judgment and a deep sense of shame. Often, the experience is so overwhelming and unbearable that we will project our pain onto a proximate target who stands in as the cause of our pain and our judgments. Usually, the person or persons who stand in as proximate targets will have done or said something that activates our pain, creating a traumatic reaction and/or sending us into a reenactment of previous trauma.

The characteristics of Beloved Community include commitments to nonviolence, to restorative processes, and to understanding conflict as an opportunity to deepen relationship. To facilitate those commitments, we recommend reframing the common narratives that employ words like “perpetrator” and “victim.” We have found that words like “author of the act” and “receiver of the act”² help us to locate ourselves in Rumi’s field, beyond the ideas of right-doing and wrong-doing.³ Other words such as “trauma re-enactment” and “proximate target”

can be useful when appropriate. None of these terms is intended to minimize the psychological, emotional, and physical disintegration that can result when we suffer trauma.

Commitment to nonviolence is a non-negotiable for Beloved Community. A shared commitment to nonviolence is required to create the sense of safety necessary for someone experiencing trauma to accept the invitation to enter liminal space. However, we would make a distinction between *safety* and *security*. People often come to community seeking a sense of security. Sometimes they say they feel a sense of betrayal or disappointment when they experience trauma triggered by others in the community. In our experience, it is important to be clear that we expect trauma to be triggered by living in community. When we enter community, we all bring our own history of trauma and interlocking oppressions. By saying a characteristic of Beloved Community is safety, we do not mean that community members will not experience some form of triggering behavior or trauma re-enactment. What is necessary is trust in the community's commitment to nonviolence as it acknowledges and confesses triggering behavior as well as the commitment to face and work through the trauma it activates.

The commitment to acknowledge and confess triggering behavior means that a restorative process or system must be in place and trusted to create the space necessary to transform or metabolize⁴ the resulting trauma. In our experience, it is best to have a physical space—a room, preferably—set apart solely for restorative practices. This act of setting apart exhibits the community recognition that conflict will happen, and therefore a commitment is needed to deal with conflict in a transformative way. This commitment to restorative practices is a statement by Beloved Community that relationship is on a par with, if not higher than, mission and purpose. That does not mean that any

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one person is necessarily a fit for a particular expression of Beloved Community; sometimes it is necessary to recognize that there isn't a fit between a person and the community. It does mean that even if we part ways, we strive to do so with mutual understanding, appreciation, and respect, and we remain open in an evolving relationship even as we part ways.

When we have a commitment to nonviolence and to restorative systems, we can begin to experience conflict as an opportunity to deepen relationship and transform trauma. Conflict can be worked through when a community is able to create and hold liminal space. However, most of us have been socialized to avoid conflict and to habitually engage in conflict-avoidant behaviors. Beloved Community calls forth a dedication to dismantling these behaviors and acknowledging conflict when it arises. This requires the ability to name conflict without scapegoating, blaming, or morally judging others. This is almost impossible without language skills such as Nonviolent Communication⁵ and support from a community committed to holding everyone with unconditional positive regard and acceptance.

WHAT BELOVED COMMUNITY IS NOT

BELOVED COMMUNITY DIFFERS from family in that it does not carry the personal, historical, and ancestral trauma that can often block a family from creating liminal space. Powerful work can be done in family situations with the necessary commitment and support, especially working with childhood issues, sibling relationships, and even ancestral trauma. However, Beloved Community creates a voluntary displacement⁶ that may not be possible in family. We find that Beloved Community is able to work with race, gender, class, and religious differences that are not present in the same way in family makeup (however, that's not to say those differences aren't present in families).

Beloved Community differs from corporate organizations and/or work environments—nonprofits, for-profits, professional partnerships, independent contracting, etc.—in that it does not rely on power-over dynamics to establish relationship. In our experience, power-over organization blocks creation of liminal space by preventing the mutual empathic presence necessary. Because of investment in the

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status quo, divesting power-over/power-under roles is usually not an option in most organizations or work environments. Therefore, power-over relationship cannot create the common holding necessary to accompany people through liminal space the same way Beloved Community can.

Lastly, Beloved Community differs from relationships based simply on shared living spaces, finances, partnerships, or other mutually advantageous living arrangements. This difference would distinguish Beloved Community from many co-ops, eco-villages, and other forms of intentional, planned residential community that do not include the intention to support one another in transformational practices. Communities that have a commitment to a common spiritual discipline or a way of life that supports personal transformation would fall within the scope of what we are calling Beloved Community. In another way, we would say that Beloved Community incorporates either an explicit or implied acknowledgment of Powers or Mystery greater than the community itself.

BELOVED COMMUNITY IN ACTION

BELOVED COMMUNITY INVOKES and relies upon this Mystery when it comes together to address trauma that has arisen in the community. Partly relying upon process and partly upon emergent properties within the gathering, the community can create a liminal space which allows the trauma to be felt, acknowledged, and witnessed through the expression of the specific conflict. Liminal space is created when the traumatized person's expression is held with compassion, nonviolence, and unconditional positive regard. The community is brought together to show up, not to take sides. This is what we sometimes hear people call "holding space." Within that held space,

the traumatized person can feel, to the degree they are capable, the full force of the trauma moving through his/her/their body.

When the trauma has spent itself and been metabolized, the person will often begin weeping quietly. There can be many reasons for the weeping, including grief for what has happened as well as relief in letting go of what has held them back from fully showing up. Again, compassion, nonviolence, or unconditional acceptance and positive regard are essential to hold space for this weeping, without comforting or otherwise interfering with the person's ability to fully embody the emotions. What can be most powerful are simple acknowledgments of responsibility appropriately claimed by those identified as authors of the triggering act or who are identified with such an act.⁷

Often, the movement in liminal space expressed by weeping will end with a curiosity about the author of the act—his/her/their motivation and intent in doing what was done. This curiosity can come out quite simply, as with the questions, “Why did you do that?” or “What were you thinking?” This is a moment of humanization, when the proximate target or author of the act, who up to this point often has been perceived simply as an “enemy,” is now seen as a complex human being attempting to meet his/her/their own needs.

SUPPORTING COMMUNAL TRANSFORMATION

HOW DOES THIS process support communal transformation? Everyone involved participates to some degree in the liminal space created by the community and cannot leave that space without being moved. We do not walk away from liminal space merely with information about what we have seen and heard. We walk away with more embodied knowledge for having participated. This embodied knowledge includes our felt sense of connection with each other and our shared reality. It is this felt sense of connection that empowers us to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is, we believe, the felt sense of what Thich Nhat Hanh has called *interbeing*. At the same time, it is a realization of the transformative act of love in creating liminal space in community—of opening one's heart to the suffering of others with others.

Liminal space in Beloved Community can be profoundly transformative. If one participates as a receiver of an act and works through

the resulting trauma, one's sense of self can be transformed. The same is true if one participates as an author of the act that activates trauma in another. If one can meet the receiver of the act in liminal space with an open heart and mind, acknowledging one's part in triggering the pain of the other, one's own pain can appear in that held space and be transformed as well. We have also found that Beloved Community can become a "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) where our ancestors show up, to both hold space and heal themselves. This is especially true when the triggering event has similarities with ancestral experiences or when the receiver of the act can distinguish trauma based on personal experience from ancestral trauma.

CONCLUSION

LIVING IN COMMUNITY provides us with a powerful means of creating liminal space. When we show up for each other as a community of intent to hold space for the suffering we carry, transformation can take place at a depth and breadth normally not available in one-on-one processes or institutional relationships. We find restorative processes and a commitment to nonviolence to be prerequisites for maximizing the transformative potential of communal liminal space. With community support, conflict can become an opportunity to transform trauma and deepen relationship. These blessings are shared to some degree by all who participate in holding liminal space. Indeed, we walk away from this liminal experience with a felt sense of the connection that undergirds our individual consciousness. We believe it is this experience of connection that offers us the most hope of navigating the social and ecological challenges we face as a species. ♦

Liminalities of Difference and Meister Eckhart's "Letting Go"

- 1 René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 318.
- 2 See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1995).
- 3 Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, eds., *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1981), 259.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 250.

The Liminality of Oppression

- 1 "National Center on Family Homelessness," *American Institutes for Research*, <https://www.air.org/center/national-center-family-homelessness>.

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- 1 Beloved Community is a term that was first used by nineteenth-century American philosopher Josiah Royce (1855–1916) in referring to a way of life based on unconditional love for all human beings. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) further developed the vision as an all-inclusive sisterhood and brotherhood based upon equality and justice. In our use of the term, we focus on the transformative aspect of Beloved Community.
- 2 These terms were coined by Dominic Barter, a mentor whose body of work with restorative circles was developed in the favelas of Brazil and its juvenile justice system.
- 3 Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–1273) wrote: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." Jalal al-Din Rumi, *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 36.
- 4 By metabolize, we mean the work of releasing energy trapped in an identity defined by trauma so that energy is freed to serve the true self or, in other words, to free up that energy for service to our soul work. We understand transforming trauma as another way to say the same thing and will use the phrases interchangeably. We like the word metabolize in some contexts to underscore the gritty, visceral nature of the work.
- 5 See Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer, 2003).

- 6 See Richard Rohr, "Introduction," (page 17): "In liminal space, we must leave business as usual—which often looks like a sleepwalking trance through daily life if we are not conscious—and voluntarily enter a world where the rules and expectations are quite different. Some call it 'voluntary displacement.'" Beloved Community can create this world where rules and expectations are quite different than business as usual.
- 7 One example is white people simply and clearly acknowledging to an African American the trauma of slavery and its legacy.

Recommended Reading

- 1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), 48.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 296.
- 3 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 6.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 82.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 16.