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Chapter 15
Embracing Endless Liminality: Improvisation and the “Practical Mystic”

Abstract: The “From Strangers to Collaborators” project connected three international scholar-leaders who may have never otherwise had an opportunity to meet. Through writing and sharing phenomenological protocols we discovered a common experience of liminality in our own lives and in the social spaces in which we live and work. The authors explored several metaphors, including nautical navigation, somatic and mindfulness practices, dance improvisation, and jazz. We imagined these as useful for enabling communication among a universe of relative strangers. We acknowledged the common experience of permanent liminality, as represented by military veterans and families, international students, and professionals and their families required to transfer workplaces as part of an evolving career path. We found a way from liminality to practical mysticism. Our social worlds and lived realities are constantly being created and re-shaped. As practical mystics, we may promote a shared and precious global humanity.

Keywords: liminality, practical mysticism, somatics, jazz improvisation, social construction

Introduction

The authors of this chapter discovered through reflecting together on our experiences in the “From Strangers to Collaborators” project, that liminal space is unfamiliar and filled with the unknown. Yet it need not be only a place of loneliness and discomfort, of rootlessness, a zombie-like half-life of not belonging anywhere, but it also can be a place of possibility and readiness, a place to step out from, a place of “yes/and,” reflecting an integration of multiple realities and potential unity. One way to describe this phenomenon is captured in the term “no-where” to “now-here.”\(^1\) The first iteration describes an apparent lack of grounding or context, where the second is reminiscent of the admonition of

\(^1\) This phrase stems from a local motorsports event in Lodz, Poland titled “the race from nowhere to nowhere” observed by co-author Buechner during the From Strangers to Collaborators

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the late Baba Ram Dass to, “be here now” (1971). The duality of this statement speaks to openness to the emergent and unexpected that we have experienced individually and together, as illustrated further in this chapter.

**Liminality and Communitas as Transformative Space**

The concept of *the liminal, or threshold or in-between space*, was first defined and applied within the anthropology of religion as part of an initiatory state or process and therefore seen as temporary (Turner 1978, 1987; van Gennep 1909). In his early work, Turner examined ritualized rites of passage within societies, often where individuals formally left behind childhood and assumed the rights and responsibilities accorded to adult members of their tribes or sects. These represented clearly marked, if only symbolic, Deathworlds after which the individuals were welcomed into new Lifeworlds that were intended to be permanent and sustainable, or new ways of being carried out in “dynamics of (social) activity” (Turner 2012, p. 220). Turner’s career-long study of “modern communitas movements,” including those within contemporary Christianity, caused him to question his original definition of a liminal state as associated only with ritual, initiation, or rites of passage, and as therefore being temporary. He noted that *communitas* movements, “try to create a style of life that is permanently contained within liminality” (La Shure 2005), otherwise described as a sort of being ‘in’ the world but not necessarily ‘of’ the world that surrounds you. Career paths and choices such as military service, foreign diplomacy, journalistic and corporate postings, and even the paths taken by refugees, turn into a series of moves. This requires a constant reframing of identity and meaning-making within different social worlds.

The capacity to create shared insights in communitas following shared experiences of liminality can also lead to a transformative shift in worldview and consciousness at the collective level (Buechner et al. 2020). The impact of such collective realizations may further expand persons’ ability to better navigate states resembling permanent liminality and may also bring new insights to others who have not shared these experiences directly. The chapter’s co-authors explore mutual interests on the topic of liminality in the sections that follow:

- Ritter: the impact of somatic mindfulness practices on awareness of, and ability to skillfully navigate liminal spaces
Spann: the process of improvisation in the co-construction of meaning using a jazz metaphor
Buechner: Storytelling and the reconstruction of meaning after war and trauma.

Ritter’s Experience: Natural Observer of Liminal Lifestyles

Co-author Ann Ritter grew up in a community where a large portion of the economy was fueled by three major military installations, each of which was reliant on the other two. As a result, both of her parents had long and stable civil service careers with the U.S. government. But it also meant Ritter stayed put while watching young friends and playmates come and go quickly each school year — sometimes even during the school year. She learned early on not to become overly attached to a friend who might not be around come the following September, even as she happily went on playdates, ate the different and sometimes exotic foods that the families of those children had learned to cook while living outside of the United States, and spent time looking up and learning about the place names where families had lived before postings in her hometown.

Just as she turned 11, Ritter, an only child, lost both her father and grandmother within four months. She spent the naturally awkward period of puberty and middle school also grieving in a *Deathworld* of lost childhood and strong parental mentoring, coupled with prolonged isolation brought on by the necessary distraction and busy-ness of her now single working mother. She entered high school painfully shy, a condition in which she often ran into former childhood friends whose families were re-posted nearby. How Ritter envied the facility with which those returned military dependent children made friends and successfully integrated themselves into sports teams and other activities, their self-assurance, and capacity for navigating social situations with an ease that took her years to develop. Although the same age, she and former close friends now had seemingly nothing in common.

It was as a Fielding student that Ritter began to understand the pain that might have been included in so many moves and the necessary expenditure of energy when starting over again and again in new places. Running into one former classmate as an adult, Ritter related her perspective and received validation for a metaphor she had developed for those military children: developing an innate ability to “transplant” or successfully “re-pot” oneself. Conversely, the childhood playmate told Ritter that she and her peers were always fascinated by locals like herself, whose family had been in more or less the same community for more than 200 years.
Ritter came to Fielding Graduate University and later to this project by virtue of one of several burning questions that fueled her doctoral work: why did her business communication students at Georgia State University (GSU) who were not native speakers of English get nervous and “lose their English” in the middle of graded public speaking assignments and team presentations? Beyond why, how could she, as an instructor and coach, better understand the reasons for this, and help the students overcome this critical stumbling block to their professional development?

GSU is among the top 20 colleges and universities in the United States for the size of the international student population. Within this natural laboratory of “relative strangers,” Ritter soon discovered that she was living into a coordinating management of meaning (CMM), in which each speech act taking place is shaped by context (Pearce 2007, p. 142), even though she did not have sufficient words for it at that time. It was not until she came to the CMM Institute learning exchanges that she was able to clarify for her students the layers of identity formation that take place in conversations – even public speaking events – and to recognize the socially constructed nature of the worlds in which they lived, studied and worked daily. Ritter’s time at Fielding also introduced her to Valerie Bentz, and the rich vocabulary of embodiment to be found in the concentration on phenomenology, somatics, and communicative leadership (SPCL) that Dr. Bentz had developed.

At GSU, Ritter followed a hunch and gave a set of somatic exercises to a small group of her business students. The set contained short yoga and meditation protocols and simple breath work (Shannahoff-Khalsa 2006) that the students should practice several times a week. Before a single semester had passed, Ritter discovered that each of the students to whom she gave the protocols had shifted his or her consciousness and awareness to the extent that the student was able to verbally articulate the underlying cause of their discomfort, and name whatever layer of identity and meaning was causing stress in the presentation setting (Ritter 2015). Once that layer was explored, the discomfort and symptoms of nervousness disappeared. Allowing the students their own individual, somatic experiences drastically shortcut the time it might have taken for them to overcome their struggles in presenting and public speaking by other means.

When entering the shared space of the From Strangers to Collaborators project, Ritter appreciated that the sessions were conducted with attention to embodiment, as many of them started with yogic breathing, meditation, or other shared somatic activities. All co-authors of this piece share the view that such practices helped us to recognize our common humanity, and that embodied awareness is an important antecedent to opening ourselves to a deeper and more mindful way of connecting, of rejoicing in the liminal.
Spann’s Story: Navigating Liminality

Rik Spann, half a generation younger than co-authors Buechner and Ritter, spent his early life following a model of unity and developing a consciousness much more like those of many third-culture kids. For those forty and below, re-location and career travel have become the accepted norm in a global economy. In the first six years of Rik’s life, his father was captain of his own small commercial ship, and home was wherever the ship traveled, with brief periods spent living in land-based homes in various ports within The Netherlands and Germany. Rik’s experiences were foundational to his becoming an artist and jazz musician, and to his accepting liminality as a norm, as he explains here:

When I could barely stand on my own feet, I was standing next to my father while he was holding his hands on the steering wheel of his ship. Much later I would learn where the word ‘cybernetics’ comes from: from the Greek word kybernes, or steersman of a ship. Yes, you have some ‘control’, when steering a ship, but only in a very subtle, dynamic relationship with waves, wind and whatever emerges from whatever happens. I liked to stand next to him. It felt like home.

I remember the first six years of my life as a fluid blend of tons of river and mixed up periods of brick houses in Germany and Holland. My first experience of something called “mess.” No chronology at all. Jam structures, the Kairos way. Home was inside. But liminality (the permanent kind) was already built-in. I liked it.

I guess I always had to rely on my “home” in my mind. I thought, for a very long time, that I was isolated. Outside of the real world out there. Linear logic, causality and such. So I tried to learn that language. And I got closer and closer.

Then, in my twenties, I discovered jazz. What’s this? It’s like jamming with waves, wind and whatever emerges from whatever happens. This is certainly not certainty. Curiosity on default. The art of not knowing. Riddles and riffing. Lost souls finally found in the waves of the groove. An invitation to jam. Home is where the welcome is.

And again I was standing next to my father. His hands on the steering wheel. When I look at the clock, the measurements next to the wheel, I think I’m in control. Sweet illusion. When I look at my father, calmly watching the bends of the river coming in from the distance, firmly shaking his hands in micro gestures that respond to the tiniest movements of this giant boat creating its way through the waves, I know I’m not in control. Sweet reality. Permanent liminality. A home that trembles around the edges and stays with me through all my stumblings.

My father is not a Jazz man. He doesn’t like the music. It makes him nervous. But he whistles when he goes to work. It makes him happy. Next to him: the captain’s son. And I take a deep breath. The river answers. Theme and variation. Call and response. Frame and freedom. Kybernes. Jazz. Even the clouds jam along. (self-observation)

This story reveals a level of comfort with liminality, suggesting that it may well be an increasingly prevalent phenomenon of modern reality.

Those born later in the 20th Century, as well as individuals born into the 21st, are more likely – as was Spann – to be differently acculturated, or exposed
to a liminal existence from early life. This has implications for the way we educate young people to make meaning in an increasingly complex and fluctuating social context, as envisioned by the “Cosmopolis 2045” project and “Cosmokidz” initiatives, respectively (Jensen n.d.). It also suggests different ways to conceptualize mental health, as an aspect of communication and social connection.

Buechner’s Experience: Liminality and the Making (and Breaking) of Moral Code

Bart Buechner has spent a lifetime collecting phenomenological moments that illustrate the unity of self as developed from the military service of his father and grandfather. As he describes it, neither man talked much about his military experiences, but the impact of this period was very much evident in the way they both were in the world. Later, after both of them had passed on, Bart went on to attend the U.S. Naval Academy, where (counter to established norms) he majored in English Literature, played in the Academy Jazz Band, and wrote a satirical column in the otherwise-conservative LOG Magazine. He went on to achieve the rank of Captain in the U.S. Navy, and then worked for nearly 20 years in a close-knit community of veterans in Northern California. In this role, he met and befriended many veterans of World War I, like his grandfather, and World War II, like his father. From his time spent in presence of his own veteran ancestors, (the Captain’s Father and Grandfather), he gleaned a deeper, yet not verbally expressed, understanding of some unique, yet universal, aspects of wartime service from these combat veterans. From their stories describing what he later came to see as liminal aspects of their lives, he learned to differentiate between the effects that combat and military service have on the human psyche, particularly the distinction between forms of combat stress and moral injury (Buechner et al. 2018). This was not due to anything that was contained or conveyed in any of his Father’s stories or their conversations, but more as a way of being that was grounded in liminal experiences, outside of normal time and space. The following illustration describes this non-verbal, yet profound, connection:

I remember my father, much like his own father who served in World War I, as a kind and quiet man, who would drop what he was doing at any time to help others. He seldom showed emotion, and did not talk much about his wartime experiences, nor what he might be feeling about things going on with the family or work, but at the same time, he was deeply sentimental. Not usually given to anger, he reserved this emotion for any situation in which he perceived that the powerful were taking advantage of the weaker.
His favorite thing to do was to get up early in the morning and go out on the lake in a small boat, either rowing or using an antiquated outboard motor to find just the right place in a channel where he had a sense the fish might be lurking amongst the weeds. Very often, he would take me, or maybe both my younger brother and I, along with him, as long as we were willing to be quiet and patient, as he was. It was there, with the sun just breaking the horizon and the early morning mist arising from the lake, that he seemed most comfortable. Although he seldom spoke much at such times, it felt that this was where we made our deepest connection, although I could not at the time verbalize this.

It was only later that I came to understand that many veterans of his era struggled in other ways with their wartime experiences, and I became interested in learning more about this phenomenon. While living and working at a veterans’ home, I spent a great deal of quite time with veterans of World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Sometimes they spoke, and sometimes they did not, but either way, the unexpressed, yet deeply felt, emotional impact was present in our interactions.

As I learned more about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the ways that it was being categorized, diagnosed and treated, I had a felt sense that we were missing something important, and that this was only part of a much larger story. Later, while doing my own dissertation research with veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan, I found the construct of PTSD as it had been applied in veterans’ mental health services to be even less applicable to what they had actually gone through, and only vaguely connected with the meaning they were making from their experiences. Digging deeper into the phenomenological roots of veterans’ stories and experiences, it became clearer that what was actually being described in these otherwise unheard, untold, and untellable stories was something different. Something that was better described as a form of moral injury, or the breaking of the moral grounding of what is right and true and proper. This realization helped me not only understand my Father’s anger at injustice, and his ever-present willingness to consider and help others; it also created a deep insight into the ineffable effects of spending time amidst the Deathworlds that accompany war, and how that knowledge can point towards the most life-giving and positive aspects of our own potential for being in the world.

(personal account)

As in the case of Rik’s experiences with his Father, Bart’s story offers a glimpse into forces that could not be described in words, at play in a state of liminality afloat on the water and away from the world of social rules and reason. In that space, navigating the forces of the river current or the memories of war, there was an exchange of meaning outside of language, space and time. Later, when Bart participated in the “Becoming Mature” replicative study with Valerie Bentz at Fielding Graduate University, the influence of some of these childhood forces became clearer and more present. Unlike the childhood “ghosts and spirits” reported by most of the women in the original study (Bentz 1989) the ghosts were not a result of direct experiences of trauma, and the spirits spoke in ways that only became apparent after the fact. The replicative study (Bentz 2014) brought out some stories that later acquired meaning. For example, Bart’s mother once told him he was named after a character in a 1950’s TV show, Dr. Barton Crane.
Only later, after earning his Doctorate in Human Development at Fielding, did he realize that both he and his namesake were “Doctors of Psychosomatic Medicine.” This apparent coincidence and Bart’s involvement in trauma research and mental health advocacy for veterans were emergent, rather than intentional, phenomena. Like Rik’s father, Bart’s dad was no musician, but in unseen ways, the experiences he shared with him moved Bart towards the arts—music, poetry and literature in search of deeper meaning, possibly connected in some mysterious way to wartime experience that he could not otherwise describe. These are the modalities that societies have traditionally turned to in a search to describe the ineffable.

**Liminality in the World – Emergence from a Century of Change**

We move next to an integrative discussion of ways that the lived experiences of the authors intersect various theoretical and practical perspectives on liminality and its influence on the human experience. Because the original definition of liminality included highly prescribed and limiting behaviors and rituals with intended goals and outcomes, the idea of ongoing, permanent liminality must also be bounded by conscious form and ritual as a way of creating a container or way of living one’s life from day to day, and of looking at the world—a concept of viewing “home” as within oneself, wherever that self might be.

A pioneering study of third-culture kids—mid-20th-Century children of diplomats, military personnel, and foreign missionaries—offered the first documented evidence of the long-term effects of a permanently liminal lifestyle—both positive and negative (Pollack/van Reken 2017), which has continued to be tracked across the decades since. The authors of those early studies have made careers of updating and enriching the literature of the same populations over time. Until recently, these effects were not directly linked to the concept of liminality. But the experience of moving among and between worlds, and finding a unified consciousness within oneself was clearly being explored in literary works that have grown more numerous with time. One such exploration is in *The Far Pavillions* (Kaye 1979).

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2 The City Hospital series aired on CBS from 1951–1953, with Melville Ruick playing the role of Dr. Barton Crane.
This “both/and” approach to navigating complexity and liminality is explored further using modalities and metaphors of mindfulness practices and contemplation, musical and dance improvisation, and healing from trauma.

**Somatic Mindfulness: Conscious Navigation of Liminal States and Deathworlds**

Although not a jazz musician like Buechner or Spann, Ritter did have an early performance background in live theater, storytelling, and dance that left her familiar with the value and benefits of many forms of improvisation and comfortable with the idea of collaborative riffing. Although she had stopped dancing when graduate business school and career took up too much of her time, Ritter found that embodiment was deeply connected to her learning style, and her health and wellbeing. In many ways, she was experiencing this as another sort of personal Deathworld – a negative impact, or absence, even though she was by all other measures outwardly successful. Of necessity, Ritter replaced the time spent dancing with a yoga and meditation practice that has served her for more than 30 years. During a still later Deathworld period – major health challenges that pointed to a necessary career change and refocus of energy in her early 40s, Ritter would find her way back to embodied learning through a postmodern dance form, contact improvisation (Pallant 2006), where sessions are “jams.”

In contact improvisation (CI), the body is the instrument and the individual is responsible for his or her own safety and body use, or performance, while also being dependent on a dance partner or partners who enable the form to come into being. Shared weight, balance, physical listening, a state of readiness, creative tension – these and other aspects are at the core of CI.

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3 Buechner, Spann, and co-author Ann Ritter were together for the first time at a Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) Institute Learning Exchange outside of Munich, Germany, in fall 2015. Rik and Bart, both jazz-influenced musicians, were invited by a mutual friend to be co-presenters of an improvisation-themed workshop. Although they had never met before, they unpacked their guitars and, at different times during the conference, improvised for several hours without rehearsal or musical scores. The extended “performance” included a finale, where Ann was an audience participant, as a way to musically summarize the essence of the conference interactions in a closing ceremony. What Ann remembers is that the music seemed to provide a special kind of resonant closure to the event and that when everything was concluded, many participants seemed reluctant to leave and go back out into their respective worlds.
The richness of the CI form’s possibilities draws Ritter back to the form occasionally. During two additional but separate periods of major external changes – her son leaving home for college, and a major illness and move away from home for her young adult daughter – several months of attending CI jams has helped Ann reorient herself within her body and adapt to a new way of being through *training perception*.

**The Phenomenology and Embodiment of the Lifeworld**

Just as somatic practices focus our awareness on the embodied nature of our awareness – in essence slowing the mind down to reveal otherwise unexamined inferences and unconscious responses to sensory triggers – so does phenomenological contemplation increase our capacity for mindfulness, or mindful awareness (Bentz/Giorgino 2016). At its core, phenomenology, as a study of consciousness, directs our attention back to the nuance and essence of what constitutes lived experience. Hermeneutic exercises, focusing our attention on certain referential and contextual aspects while setting aside or bracketing others, is one way of capturing such lived experience. Yet another way is unbracketed, or heuristic, phenomenology – the immersive, lived experience in action (Moustakas 1990). Our social worlds are also created and sustained in processes of communication, the dynamic and constitutive nature of which is described in various social constructionist theories including the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) (Pearce 2007). The heuristics, or interpretive models, of CMM, can help to illuminate the impact that communication itself, as a process, or pattern of engagement, contributes to perceptions of reality, and how these perceptions may come to be embodied in the intersubjective space. CMM, as a practical theory, can also help uncover new possibilities, including finding common ground (Wasserman/Fisher-Yoshida 2019, p. 63).

**Cosmopolitan Communication and the Bridging of Differences**

Pearce (1989) described how forms of communication used in social systems may develop progressively over four levels of complexity in engagement with others. This development begins with *monocultural communication*, where everyone is viewed and treated as having the same social reality; followed by *ethnocentric communication*, where we recognize otherness but treat those we view
as “other” as being lesser or inferior; then *modernistic communication*, where everyone is viewed as distinct and different; and finally *cosmopolitan communication*, which considers and values both individual differences and societal unity. Cosmopolitan communication transcends many of the barriers inherent in monocultural, ethnocentric, and modernistic forms of communication by recognizing that everyone is both similar and different, enlarging the social sphere. In this view, differences are taken into account, not ignored or discounted (Matoba 2013). Cosmopolitan social interactions are enacted through communicative forces of *coordination* and *coherence* as well as a third force or quality critical to bridging differences and navigating liminality: *Mystery*. We designate *Mystery* with a capital M, which represents emergent properties that are neither pre-programmed by culture nor externally imposed by systems or structures (Buechner et al. 2018). The quality of Mystery or emergence is extremely important in collaborating with strangers, as described earlier through the jazz metaphor of improvisation. By opening ourselves to “strangeness” in a way that does not make it a quality of the “other” but rather a shared and liminal quality of being, we may also be opening a channel that allows something new to emerge, as in Heidegger’s *clearing*.4 In such a channel, or space, unanticipated and unplanned things, like shared meaning between relative strangers, increased self-knowledge, or spontaneous musical compositions, can come into existence and find the proper form. One way to express and enact this type of emergent space is to communicate in such a way that *Mystery* is our primary objective, or the highest level of context, for what we are making together (Pearce 2011). This implicates ways of being together that are inherently creative or open to experimentation.

On reflection, we have found that these dynamics of cosmopolitan communication and social construction resonate strongly and directly support several of the “ten qualities of phenomenologists” (Marlatt/Bentz 2019) observed to be at work in the From Strangers to Collaborators project. The writing of *protocols* (rich descriptions of lived experience) can be viewed as an act of *coordination* that allows relative strangers to work together outside of a commonly-shared culture. By sharing these and reflecting together, they were able to develop *coherence* among the group, enhanced by heuristics that revealed both Lifeworld and Deathworld patterns in their stories. In some cases, something unexpected (Mystery) emerged among them, embodying the quality of “embracing authenticity

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4 Martin Heidegger referred to the clearing as a space of “un-concealment” in which we have access to what we are not, as well as what we are. It is a space where “new beings may emerge.” (n.d.)
and wonderment” (Marlatt/Bentz 2019, p. 8). It is this quality that may be essential to navigating permanent liminality.

### The (Mature) Self and Mystery

The foregoing discussion of opening self to Mystery raises the question of the integrity of self and identity in the presence of liminality. If we are to meaningfully connect with others in liminal space and communicate in the cosmopolitan sense, then we need a Self (denoted by a “Big S”) that resonates with the transcendent potential of Big “M” Mystery – yet grounds us in a state of being which is at home amidst liminality. Ann Ulanoff describes this as a sense of center, similar to finding a home within ourselves:

> Our desire to align ourselves with transcendence affects the whole body. It is like a plant: in living true to our nature we also make oxygen for everyone to breathe. Desiring the center in ourselves, which is in the center of all selves and all things, we unclog an artery, making passage from and to the center easier for everyone, and others ‘efforts make it more accessible to us. Together we build up the spiritual atmosphere. In chaos theory, the “butterfly effect” means a butterfly lifting its wing can change the course of the whole cosmos. Similarly, one or two of us, desiring to be planted in the center can open the way to it and it to us for all of us. The Self exists in us as a predisposition to be oriented around a center. It is the archetype of the center, a primordial image similar to images that have fascinated disparate societies throughout history. (Eisendrath/Dawson 1997, p. 198)

This insight, when applied to the model of Cosmopolitan Communication, is particularly useful in interpreting our place amidst the co-constructive dynamics of engaging with others amidst liminal space. Such a Self is not dependent upon culture or system for meaning and integrity and can connect with other Selves around centers as they emerge. Yet, at the same time, a centered community generates potentially transformative energy, much like the condition of communitas envisioned by Turner (Buechner et al. 2020). The kind of Self that has the capacity to be open to the forces of Mystery (and other Selves) while remaining centered is very much in line with what Bentz describes as a “mature personality” or “person incarnate,” possessing qualities of “artistic creativity, philosophical reflection, and authentic love” (Bentz 1989, p. 16). Bentz further defines this state of maturity as something of a “gift” not being “fixed or fixated” but rather engaged “in a living dialogue with his (/her) own immaturity . . . and . . . some measure of disorder” that is wonderful, particularly because it cannot be “predicted, controlled or constructed” (Bentz 1989, p. 16–17).

Having established the notion of the Self as a form of mature personality which is capable of engaging with emergence and the presence of Mystery, we
will later consider how such a Self may operate as a practical mystic, walking between the worlds of visible and unseen forces and, at times, making useful connections. Cultural and artistic representations of successful liminal existence remain important, and they are becoming more common and widespread, just as they need to continually operate from a defined liminal place is likewise growing. In the following section, narratives from the co-authors’ own lives, their work, and their teaching touch on the liminal as they have come to know it.

The Jazz Metaphor of Collaboration Among Strangers: Jamming into an Unfinished Symphony

A musician walking onto a symphony stage in the presence of a conductor will expect to be compelled towards certain responses and ways of being, might have a more closed, rigid attitude than one would find in an intimate night club. The latter scenario and its attendant environment invite a player to proactively engage with (“riff on”) whatever emerges, without paying close attention to a pre-programmed outcome. Such emergence requires mutual trust, as well as a cultivated skill to recognize and engage in musical patterns. When a player riffs on another player, there is nothing to be proven. It’s all about probing the emergent, and in the process, deliberately setting aside any prior notion of a plan. Every setup by one musician serves as a scaffold to enable the collective exploration of the potentialities by other members of the group. As such, every gesture that emerges is fresh. Every response is new. Structure emerges and keeps its fluidity.

Many traditional organizations operate from a perspective similar to the symphony, which then requires members to follow pre-scripted forms of enactment and forecloses many other possible outcomes. This form of “closing the mind” is something that – from a reductionist perspective – is often assumed to be necessary as a way of maintaining standardization, predictability, and order. For many purposes, this may be correct. However, our focus in our exploration of the dynamics of collaboration among strangers focused on the enactive potential of creating something like a permanent liminal space, free of many restrictions and in which spontaneous collaboration could emerge.

In framing the issue this way, we challenge the notion that it would take a pro-active step to collaborate with strangers. Instead, we see the invitation as the removal of an artificially imposed barrier to what otherwise might be happening spontaneously. When the strange-ness in strangers is perceived as something integral to life and living together in true community, we can engage collaboratively in enacting Mystery together, also described as “hold(ing) (an open) space
for many possible interpretations, especially those of others who are different from oneself in some way,” (Jensen n.d., p. 3).

On Engaging the Lifeworld as a Practical Mystic

Every one of us is a mystic deep in our hearts, or so says Beatrice Bruteau in her preface to The Mystic Heart (Teasdale 2001). Bruteau goes on to discuss the challenge of raising consciousness to an explicit level, a level that reveals the knowledge that we are not mutually alienated from one another and that each of us is sufficient “as is.” The practice of acquiring this knowledge is how we can become mystics in experience as well as potentiality.

Bruteau’s view parallels the type of practical mysticism espoused as necessary by Evelyn Underhill’s work more than 100 years ago as she witnessed events leading to the outbreak of World War I. Recently reissued, her work (2002, 2010) resonates with the type of global thinking and accountability of self that is not just desirable but critical – economically, socially and politically – as we move forward through the 21st Century. Both authors echo many of the concepts, features, and implications of the cosmopolitan communication model (Pearce 2007), developed out of the author and scholar’s coordinated management of meaning (CMM).

Pearce’s hierarchy of meaning, cosmopolitan communication, and other models of social construction through conscious language and behavioral choices help show that identity is multi-layered and complex and that the layers are fluid rather than static. As a practical theory of social construction, these heuristic models of the CMM offer working insights to help individuals perceive – and often change – patterns of communication as they unfold. Similarly, a liminal identity or practical mysticism – a capacity for being with whatever is emerging at any given moment – opens up ways of being that teach authenticity, and the ability to recognize what is being made in (and through) a complex dance between what Pearce called “episodes, selves, and relationships” (Pearce 2007, pp. 101–102). Pearce further describes the emergent properties associated with these entities as patterns of communication, forms of consciousness, and relational minds (2007, p. 102). Heightened awareness of these emergent properties, in turn, allows the practical mystic to determine the appropriate facet of oneself to privilege in any given situation in order to enact a higher-level reality. Achieving such flexibility and intentional complexity of identity may also improve resilience – the ability to bounce back from adversity – and what many yogis call operating from a neutral mind (Khalsa 2007).
Consistent with Bruteau’s holistic vision, unity is here for all of us right now. Although technology and the current scope of social media are potentially isolating and divisive, at the same time, they also can be unifying. We can allow the sheer volume of information and the forces of division to polarize our thinking, or we can just as well harness these forces for social justice and global parity. Such technology allows relative strangers to work together in real-time, to co-create, to bear witness, and to improvise in the presence of liminality. This is primarily the phenomenon that our co-authors of this chapter have attempted to explore, embrace and describe.

Mysticism, Mystery, and History

For some further context on practical mysticism, it may be helpful to further consider the connections between the work of G. H. Mead (1934) and Evelyn Underhill. When Underhill first began addressing mysticism, World War I was brewing in Europe. A new introduction to her republished work (2010) rightly concludes that the past 100 years of both global upheaval and global interconnectedness indicate the necessity for mystical traditions to strongly re-emerge and makes some suggestions as to how and where they might.

As did Mead, Underhill grounded much of her exploration of mysticism in the West from the early lectures given by William James. But as she refined and continued to publish, Underhill’s views on mysticism began to shift. Rather than agreeing with James’s conclusions about the features, or markers, of mysticism being fixed in place, Underhill (2002) concluded that the life of a mystic unfolded in stages – awakening, purgation (including transcendence of the ego), illumination and a dark night of the soul as her first four stages, followed by the last, permanent stage: a unitive life. In a similar vein, Mead stated that the common problem of the “artist, philosopher and critic” was to face “the relation between permanence and change” (Mead 1934, p. 322).

Eventually, Underhill refined her work again so that rather than five stages, there were three forms, which in turn resemble the three yogic stages of development – discipline (commitment to practice), attention (to shifts in consciousness and the necessary effect of those shifts on the Lifeworld, including Heidegger’s concept of the clearing where we connect with universal consciousness (Chai 2014) and eventual mastery (unity, or a unitive life).

If World War I was the beginning of a period of world-wide awakening, as Underhill (2010) suggests, the rest of the 20th Century gave us plenty of chaotic and attention-getting material to help move our planet along its mystical path. Not one but two world wars and many other serious military conflicts around
the globe, the birth, and popularity of jazz music, the movement of yoga and meditation to the Western Hemisphere from India – these are only some of the indicators of a world-wide shift in consciousness that was nearly 100 years in the making. This global awakening – or the opportunity for awakening – would have completed during the latter half of the 20th Century, followed by the breakdown of old social orders and systems (purgation), out of which may arise both illumination and a societal dark night of the soul. In light of this duality, we must collectively realize that each of us is responsible for ourselves and that how we choose to behave will affect others – a kind of butterfly effect. Applying this logic, we can postulate that the simultaneous existence of Lifeworlds and Deathworlds may be an inevitable consequence of what we may recognize as post-truth social worlds (Buechner et al. 2018). In the current political situation, leaders and their corporate sponsored media spread polarized narratives one day and contradict them the next, thereby further confusing an already traumatized and unsuspecting public. This realization not only gives us important choices, but requires us to – more than ever before – acquire the capacity to be comfortable with, and skillfully navigate, the liminal spaces in between, where the existence of multiple realities and the principle of “both and” (Pearce 2007, 41–42) is a fixed part of the landscape.

**Conclusion**

As we acknowledged from the beginning, the prospects of collaborating with strangers, and doing so in an ongoing liminal state, can be a bit unsettling. Because Turner’s original definition of liminality included highly prescribed and limiting behaviors and rituals with intended goals and outcomes, the idea of ongoing, permanent liminality must also be bounded by conscious form and ritual as a way of creating a container or way of living one’s life from day to day. To help ground this type of liminality in some familiar metaphors, we presented some concepts from jazz improvisation, dance, yoga, and other somatic practices to offer practical models for engagement. These practices offer a way of looking at the world that encompasses a concept of viewing “home” as within oneself, wherever that (Big “S”) Self might be.

Training and awareness to raise personal consciousness and some kind of daily somatic practice or activity are vital to creating such an internally focused sense of the mature self as grounded or “home” while not being rigidly fixed. Although not an exclusive list, examples are mindfulness or vipassana meditation, along with some system of hatha yoga, or a comprehensive yoga system
that also emphasizes a meditative component (kundalini yoga and meditation, for example, which includes movement, and both chanted meditations and stillness).

The more the body is activated first through a somatic practice, the more likely the mind is to be stilled and ready to access information being brought forth in any situation through cellular memory. The continued repetition of a somatic practice will create and strengthen neural pathways that sustain such bodily informed and conscious behaviors. The result will be an individual who is “at home,” who acts authentically and appropriately from within themselves. The more consistent the practice of self as home, the more masterful an individual will become at feeling like a whole, integrated human being, regardless of where he or she is in the world.

The notion of a “practical mystic” as one who can remain grounded in liminal space while at the same time observing the world around them, takes on great significance when we consider the simultaneous existence of Lifeworlds and Deathworlds as equally real but opposing potential realities. The ability to discern (and change) these patterns, like the capacity to make one’s self a home, is something that can be further developed by practices that can, over time, be transformative. These include phenomenological writing (Bentz/Rehorick 2008), critical reflection, and looking directly at (not through) patterns of communication (Pearce 2007) to discern the socially constructed nature of the emerging realities in which we find ourselves enmeshed.

Acting as a practical mystic in this context begins with cultivating a new way of seeing and being in the world and takes the necessary next steps by serving to interpret and translate what is seen into a viable or actionable Lifeworld context. The skills are available for anyone to learn.

References


Chapter 15 Embracing Endless Liminality


