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Character and Transitions

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Life in Transition: Using Reflection and Gratitude to Discover Hope, Optimism, and Resilience

Jeffrey A. Haverland

Abstract

Humans are not immune to the challenges of uncertainty, transition, and liminality—the space leading up to a transition, but we have it within us to persevere. How we navigate liminal space is deeply personal, and even the emotionally strongest individuals must find ways to demonstrate resilience in order to successfully transition to a new normal. Reflection and gratitude, valuable tools for developing resilience, force us to pause and find clarity in real time. However, both require ongoing practice. As we seek to find our happy endings, we must realize that fairy tales are merely tales, and we should strive for happier endings, which emerge when we practice reflection and gratitude to grow optimism, hope, and ultimately resilience.

I'm Trying My Best to Be Okay^{1,2}

Dear Jack,

I am trying my best, but I miss you. After we dropped you off, I cried all the way home. The next day, I cried when I saw your closed door. I cried when I opened the dishwasher. My heart hurts so badly, and I feel broken. I cry as if I have lost everything, and I feel so ashamed that I am not stronger. When I was a new dad, they told me life would be chaotic, crazy, and fast; and I worried about everything—except for the day you would grow up and leave—that was just way

too far off, until now. I know you are going to be busy with your new life, and I won't fault you for needing to rearrange your priorities, even though selfishly this will sting a bit. Just remember that the door is always open, and I am here for you. As one of your greatest fans, I'm so proud of you! Don't worry that I am sad. I am grateful for all you have brought to my life, and I will find my way through this. I just need some time.

Love, Dad

I find myself in a period of uncertainty and am struggling with what should be an “ordinary” (A. Brooks) and expected transition that began when, like millions of other people in this world, my son grew up and left home. However, I feel devastated. The truth is that for 18 years, my identity has been hopelessly entwined with his and without this piece of my life intact, I find myself needing to redefine who I am. Without my son here, life is different, and I fear the uncertainty. I am in a different space where I must reconcile my past self with my current reality and navigate this unfamiliar liminal space of a major transition.

Like any stubborn human, my initial reaction to this change—and countless others—is heavy with despair as I fight against a shifting normal. I just want to go back to contentment with a life I loved, but this is impossible, and I must move in a new direction. Where do I begin? More importantly, where

I must reconcile my past self with my current reality and navigate this unfamiliar space of a major transition.

do we all begin? Let's start by realizing that, to a large extent, we are responsible for what happens next in our lives (Frankl et al.) and that our decisions influence our experiences, determining whether our outcomes will be positive, negative, or neutral. This means that we need strategies to manage liminality in our lives.

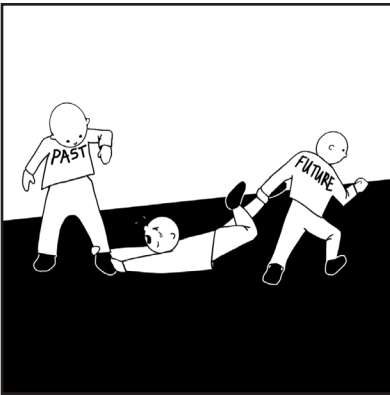
Living in liminal space, we can use reflection and gratitude to grow resilience. It is important to become more aware of our emotional needs so we can best position ourselves to overcome struggles in our lives. By understanding that we can fully govern only ourselves, we become more aware of our needs through personal reflection and gratitude and lay the foundation for resilience. However, before any of this can happen, let's consider liminality and what it means for each of us.

I Pointed to the Sky and Now You Want to Fly³

Dear Dad,

I don't like talking about leaving and being gone because then it becomes real. I can't hide away and pretend that nothing is changing or nothing is different. . . I love you and Mom and Anna so much and don't you guys ever forget that. No matter how far away I feel, I am only an hour away. You are always welcome to come for lunch dates or just to hang out.

Love, Jack



Discomfort in liminal space

Life moves fast and sometimes we just need a little more time to live in the comfort of our current normal as there is discomfort in liminal space—the uncertain space of a transition. Although liminality is universal, predictable, and repeatable (A. Brooks), the causes of our liminal states are deeply personal and our reactions to them tend to be highly subjective. Therefore, it makes sense that similar experiences resonate differently from one person to another, although we can tease out common threads among

humankind. The first commonality is our susceptibility to uncertainty and potential loneliness brought on by disruptions in our lives (Robbins). The second is the universal process by which we experience liminality.

Liminality requires us to understand the processes of separation and margin that arise as we confront and reassess our vision of normal (Van Gennep as cited in Feiler 61-62). Defining normalcy calls us to embrace our liminal reality and suffer purposefully. While it is a difficult proposition to view suffering as a positive experience, it encourages the vulnerability necessary to separate from our past and be receptive to the good that can come from living in marginal or liminal space. It is at this threshold—between what we knew and what we are coming to know—where we experience the transformative power of liminality and realize how our identity is often defined by the time we spend in liminal moments.

We spend an inordinate amount of our lives seeking *normal* in an undefined space, but what if the normal state we seek no longer exists? Left in the

limen, we must find value in our discomfort so that we can move toward a new state of being. At the very least, liminal living shapes our character by leaving us with what David Brooks refers to as a residue on our soul (13). It is this residue, building up over time, that serves to illuminate a profound truth that our ultimate transition may come into fruition so slowly and invisibly that we may not notice it until we have no other option but to accept it (Bridges and Bridges 27). That is, we may already be crossing through the limen and unable to turn back.

It is possible that liminality would be more tolerable if we could control the events shaping our lives. When these events are beyond our control (as most are), they can lead to moments of disequilibrium, pain, and distress (A. Brooks). This can be seen in the most extreme circumstance of physical death where a severe and irreversible transition becomes the most profound example of loss. But what about a less extreme case of love and loss in our lives like losing a job or ending a relationship? Love and loss still interact, but unlike physical death, there is continued hope for rebirth after a symbolic death (Gignoux as cited in Bussalari and Goodell 103). As we embrace change and purposefully engage with suffering, we have an opportunity to be born anew. However, rebirth offers little solace amid uncertainty—even less in moments of calm and peace because we know nothing can last forever and loss is inevitable. Though this may be discouraging, if we seek to avoid suffering, we risk losing the emotional unfolding of our lives.

The impact of loss is profoundly different for each of us—even when confronting similar situations—and our reactions to it can call our character into question. For example, is it acceptable to grieve the loss of a pet in the same way our friend grieves the loss of their parent? Is it okay for our loss to pale in comparison with the loss others are facing? Can loss impact us in a way that seems incongruent with societal norms? The answer to each of these questions is *yes*. Loss is rooted in love and, as Brené Brown notes, love is uncertain and risky and leaves us emotionally exposed (*Daring* 34). It appears that loss and love share a common footprint in that love makes us vulnerable, vulnerability makes us susceptible to loss, and the threat of eventual loss causes us to fear liminal uncertainty. Is the love we can experience worth the pain that may accompany eventual loss? This question can be asked of relationships, jobs, and countless other experiences in our lives. In fact, the potential for loss is often how we judge the importance

If we seek to avoid suffering, we risk losing the emotional unfolding of our lives.

of someone or something. Whether negative or positive, liminality is punctuated with some degree of loss.

So, how do we convince ourselves that our liminal struggle will be worth it in the end? Liminal experiences may bring uncertainty, discomfort, and even pain. Our goal must be to find peace amid the limen when the path is naturally uncertain, uncharted, and defined in the moment (Chödrön 205). To do this, we need to stop running from discomfort⁴ and look for opportunities to reflect and be grateful for what we already have. It may be that in these chaotic moments we find pathways to resilience as we reflect on how far we've come and generate gratitude from our vulnerability (Brown, *Gifts* 82).

It Wasn't So Long Ago We Walked Together and You Held My Hand⁵

Dear Jack,

Well, Mom talked me into reading your letter the day you went back. I struggled through it but thought I was okay. Ten minutes later, I just sobbed. This may sound dumb, but it is in these moments where I am just so amazed by how you have changed my life in ways I could never imagine. It's rough getting old, and I realize that I cannot hang onto you the way I used to . . . though I still want to. Remember this when you have kids someday. It seems like you have all the time in the world, yet this is only a half-truth because the days may seem long, but the years strike like lightning (fast and never again).⁶ You are one good human—even though you procrastinate on sending emails.

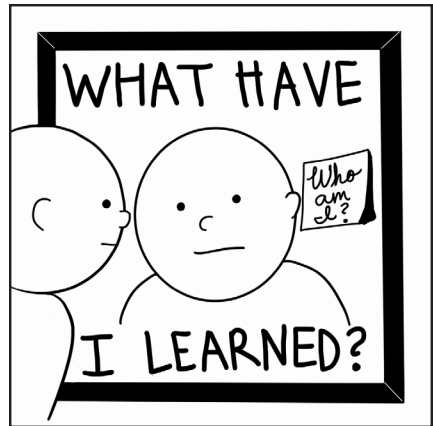
Love You, Dad

There is something profound about our human ability to reflect on situations and find greater meaning.⁷ Reflection can provide us with direction as we come to understand how moments, people, or things shape the trajectory of our lives and define our character as we find our footing amid the limen. This is because reflection affords us a unique opportunity to consider our lives formatively. If we can learn to use formative data to make purposeful decisions, we can be more strategic about our growth and consequently more reflective.

Reflection calls us to be consequential thinkers who are keenly aware of the positive and negative repercussions of our actions, and yet this can only happen when we purposefully recognize that “we can make our own choices

and decide what brings us peace” (Feiler 62). This recognition reminds us that the only thing we can control is our own behavior and that when we choose to remain in a state of disarray, we fail to acknowledge our personal responsibility to ourselves and others. To find our way through the limen, we must be able and willing to introspectively step back and see who and what we are at any given moment. Reflection affords us the opportunity to learn—albeit not always comfortably—from life in real time. It allows us to see where we have been, to marvel in the experiences we have had, and to envision a future that is hopeful—even when the present is not.

Reflection makes us aware of how our thoughts, feelings, and emotions can drastically color our circumstances. It is okay to be angry, sad, happy, even bewildered, disgusted, or frustrated, but to what end? We should try to purposefully reflect upon our circumstances and find greater meaning for ourselves and others, learning to see our lives within the novel context where the only way to go is forward. This requires us to recognize an altered, uncomfortable, or painful reality where we acknowledge our loss and begin to move on.



Reflection

The beginning and ending of life are beyond our control. Yet between these two extremes we have countless opportunities to come to know ourselves better, with none so important as those that make us struggle. Even when it is painful, reflection helps us make sense of our circumstances. Don’t get me wrong, reflection is difficult when we are under emotional distress (Healy 115). In fact, we may find ourselves overwhelmed and unwilling to reflect, but it is in these vulnerable moments—although potentially disorienting—where we can experience vibrant periods of exploration and reconnection (Van Gennep as cited in Feiler 143). This is where reflection—punctuated by realism (Healy 124)—can provide moments of clarity as we reorient ourselves in newly defined space.

Successfully maneuvering in both good times and bad calls for ongoing reflection. When we allow reflection to be formative, it becomes a worthy task that allows us to experience gratitude.

Dear Dad,

I remember lying in bed one weekend and just crying, thinking that nothing will ever be what it used to be. That is the truth though—nothing will ever go back exactly to the way it was and I had to learn to be okay with that.

Love, Jack

Somedays, We Can't See the Joy That Surrounds Us⁸

Dear Jack,

I am just curious—what have you become more grateful for since you left for school last fall? I hope you are having a great day!

Love, Dad

If we pause long enough to force our eyes open—to look around—we have the chance to see the good in our lives and to allow gratitude to emerge. Life is not perfect, and we often get lost in trying to make it so. The truth is that beauty is everywhere, but it often takes more than a cursory glance to see it. Are we ready to see it? If we see it, how will we allow it to change us? Will we be grateful for its impact in our lives?

Gratitude serves to empower us when we are honest about who we are and what we need. It acts as a conduit to further define our identity and character by allowing us to see past our liminal circumstances. But this requires a shift in our mindset and an acknowledgment of the abundance in our lives even when we are unsatisfied. When life is good, we are



Gratitude


content. When life is hard, we notice discrepancies. It is here that we struggle to find happiness in our circumstances, and it is here where many of us need to do a better job of acknowledging the gifts we have. Consider this: “If the opposite of scarcity is enough, then practicing gratitude is how we acknowledge that there’s enough and that we’re enough” (Brown, *Daring* 124). Standing vulnerable in an uncomfortable space, we learn to embrace the abundance around us.

To express gratitude—in the right way, to the right people, for the right things (Aristotle)—is to exemplify the greatest virtue (Cicero ch. 33, sec. 80). In this sense, gratitude has the potential to become deeply rooted in our character. Gratitude is important as it is a strong and frequent human emotion (McCullough et al.) benefiting both the giver and the receiver, but it must be regularly practiced for it is “a little like faith without works—it’s not alive” (Brown, *Daring* 79). Let’s bring gratitude to life.

We best practice gratitude when we do so spontaneously and continuously through heartfelt recognition of a positive contribution to our lives. As we do this, it is important to take inventory of how we make other people feel and how our actions make us feel. It helps to pay attention to how our expressions of gratitude ground us and at the same time offer levity following an action that is natural, sincere, and validating.

We have been taught from a very young age to show gratitude. *Please, thank you*, holding a door, and gift giving are common expressions of gratitude. Although this type of gratitude is meaningful and important, it has the power to be so much more. When practicing gratitude, we need to imagine how it can shape our character and help those around us while disposing us to hope (Chaudhary et al.; “Grateful”), productivity, and protection by mitigating anger, loneliness, depression (Manchula and Patra 37), unhappiness, helplessness, and hopelessness (Gilbert 21). Gratitude offers vitality, happiness, physical health, optimism, less stress, fewer episodes of clinical depression (Easterbrook 238-239), and paves the way for beneficial outcomes like creativity, knowledge, resilience, social integration, and health (Emmons and McCullough 53). But it won’t happen without effort, without purposefully finding ways to make room for gratitude in our lives.

Gratitude allows us to thrive in adverse conditions (Gupta and Kumar 191) by providing us with a reserve of resources that we can draw from in our times of need (Emmons and McCullough 152). Gratitude is transformational, but it cannot only exist in good times. “A grateful heart must . . . be grounded in a general view of life that sees existence itself as a gift and anything after that—including what is difficult and even disastrous—as a potential blessing” (“Grateful”). If we see life as a blessing, we can more easily reflect on our gifts.



This cyclical relationship between gratitude and reflection is at the heart of resilience.

Even amid our darkest liminal moments, gratitude will illuminate the blessings in our lives. Through gratitude, we have hope of uttering appreciation contrary to the circumstances in our lives and finding joy in unintended places. If we don't practice gratitude and allow ourselves to know joy, we are otherwise missing out on the two things that will sustain us during inevitably hard times (Brown, *Gifts* 82). Gratitude sounds simple, but to do it well we must come to know ourselves better through reflection so that we have perspective.

As we pause long enough to be grateful, we can find opportunities for deeper reflection, which can further spur gratitude. This cyclical relationship between gratitude and reflection is at the heart of resilience because it fuels optimism and hope, both essential elements if we are to find our way through and eventually out of the limen.

Dear Dad,

I've become more grateful for time. I mean that no matter how long I get to do something, at least I get to do it. Whether that means time to come home or playing time in soccer, I have become more grateful that I'm getting the opportunity to do so.

Love, Jack

But You'll Be Alright on the First Night When I'm Gone⁹

Dear Dad,

I will not lie—I miss you too. At first, I thought it was super easy (the transition and all). I started to really miss everything and everyone after about a month. You know that you will always have to yell for me to do the dishes (that probably won't ever change). I know that you will always be my Dad and you know that I will always be your Jackie. Remember, if you're feeling sad, I am only a phone call away.

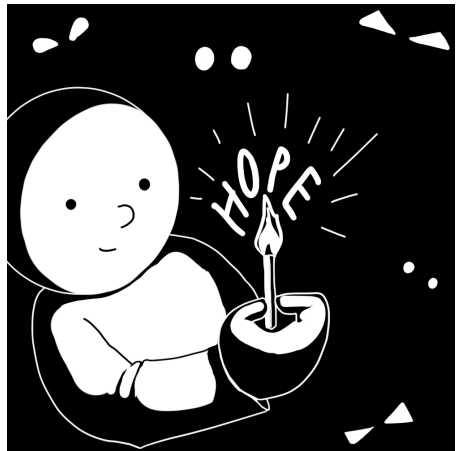
Love, Jack

Even in our lowest moments, life will call, and we need to be willing to hear it. Eventual pain may be a cost of happiness and love, but that should not deter us from pursuing either. Often it is pain that shows us the depth of our love and reminds us of how someone or something marked our soul. Suffering and coming to understand our pain, we learn that we can stay the course, overcome our challenges, and move forward optimistically.

Optimism ignites resilience by energizing us with a creative approach to coping with challenging situations (Southwick and Charney 35) and helps “carry us through the doubt and fear” (Brown, *Gifts* 66). When we are optimistic and hopeful, we can find joy, gratitude, and grace (Brown, *Gifts* 73); we can find the strength to continue forward.

Resilience is not a quid pro quo tradeoff that allows us to choose to give up our personal dreams and thereby avoid suffering. As we become more resilient, we are better able to acknowledge our suffering, learn from it, and willfully move past it. There is a powerful truth in looking back and understanding how the lowest moments of our lives were not as low or insurmountable as we once believed. Through these moments, we became resilient because we found optimism, and we had hope.

Resilient people find ways to persevere and grow through the liminal uncertainty that accompanies loss—physical or emotional. Resilience comes when we recognize the relationship between happiness and eventual loss, where the pain of loss is vastly outweighed by the joy brought by the object of our grief. For those who love, loss is inevitable, but love gives us hope that the darkness will eventually pass. Hope is our greatest source of resilience and a direct consequence of reflection and gratitude.



Hope

We can start by learning to express gratitude for those who support us when we suffer and protect us when we are vulnerable. The hopeful outcome of any situation is that we navigate the limen in order to find a better way to live (Buzzanel 9; Skar 259) by coming to terms with loss (Boerner and Jopp 171) and recognizing the beneficial outcomes that arise from major disruptions in our lives (Masten 228). Until we can fully realize the meaning behind our liminal moments, our lives may stall, and even though this may offer momentary stability, it does nothing for our long-term survival. After all, “Life is in the transitions. We can’t ignore these central times of life; we can’t wish or will them away. We have to accept them, name them, mark

them, share them, and eventually convert them into fuel for remaking our life stories” (Feiler 81).

No matter what life throws at us, we can learn to stay the course and realize that even the happy endings of fairy tales require sacrifice and struggle (Feiler 81). When life presents hardship and misfortune, resilient people overcome circumstances to be extraordinary—even if only for themselves. Our ability to be strong and overcome obstacles empowers us—this is how resilient people survive and thrive (Jay 302-303). Without the suffering, without the fall, without the uncertainty, without an opportunity to reflect and be grateful, we cannot rise. To this end, I encourage you to:

Optimism ignites resilience by energizing us with a creative approach to coping with challenging situations.

- Embrace liminal experiences—even when they hurt or seem unfair. It is in these moments that our character is shaped.
- Be vulnerable. Come to know uncertainty as a conduit for new experiences.
- Value love over potential loss and be open to evolving relationships.
- Reflect often and find value in the space where you reside.
- Practice gratitude.
- Accept that some things are beyond your control and gain power in that thinking.
- Use reflection and gratitude to build resilience.
- Be grounded but hopeful and openly share hope with others.
- Forget the fairy tales and mythical happy endings and use resilience to navigate life and find your happier ending.
- When holding your breath is safer than breathing¹⁰ . . . breathe deeply!

I Will Rise a Thousand Times Again¹¹

Dear Jack,

It took some distance for me to realize how incredibly thankful I am for who you are and what you have done for my life. I still miss you like crazy, but my heart hurts a bit less now. I know you are going to

be okay because you have shown me that you are going to be okay. I think I am starting to get the hang of this. I may still find myself sad from time to time, but that's love for you! I'm still here if you need me, but we've got this!

Love, Dad

Resilience fuels our desire to push on despite uncertainty because history shows us we can overcome our suffering. Being resilient is considered a mark of great character and happens best when we learn to show gratitude despite our circumstances while using reflection to gain a purposeful vantage. Reflection and gratitude make way for joy as joy is found “when we are grateful for what we have; and when we don’t squander moments. Experiencing joy allows us to build resilience, and to cultivate hope” (Brown, *Daring* 125-126). Hope is what fuels us when all else may have failed us.

Embrace liminal experiences—even when they hurt or seem unfair. It is in these moments that our character is shaped.

At some point in our lives, we all hit bottom and must fight to reach the surface and breathe again (Sandberg 29). Although there is nothing wrong with yearning for a life of stability, devoid of pain, suffering, and liminal moments, it is unrealistic. There is something profound about the lessons that emerge when we realize that to fully live in the present, we can never return to what was. Our lives are marked by change, and we must prepare ourselves for liminal living. In doing so, we can become more adept at using tools such as reflection and gratitude to help us become more resilient by finding peace in the uncertainty that we all have experienced and will undoubtedly face again in the remaining years of our lives.

Jeff Haverland is an Associate Professor of Teacher Education at the University of Dubuque and was a Nationally Board Certified middle school science teacher, curriculum coordinator, and principal. Most recently, he completed his NREMT certification and volunteers for the Centralia Peosta Fire Department. He supports educator and student safety and risk management through ethics training and education; volunteer opportunities; and local, state, and national advocacy in the areas of Title IX, educator ethics and conduct, and the Model Code of Ethics for Educators. He serves on the executive boards of S.E.S.A.M.E and the Iowa Association of Colleges of Teacher Education and is a member of the planning

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Notes

¹ Anson Seabra, "Trying My Best."

² I will be using song titles because the music speaks personally to me, encouraging and strengthening me. Maybe it will speak to you, too.

³ Nichole Nordeman, "Slow Down."

⁴ Readers can explore issues of character and discomfort in volume 5 of this journal, *Character and . . . Discomfort*.

⁵ Michael Bubl , "Forever Now."

⁶ Tanya Tucker, "Bring My Flowers Now."

⁷ Robert Zussman described this concept as *autobiographical occasion*, in which humans are "called on to reflect in systematic and extended ways on who we are and what we are" (Feiler).

⁸ Josh Groban, "Thankful."

⁹ Joey + Rory, "When I'm Gone."

¹⁰ Sara Bareilles and John Legend, "A Safe Place to Land."

¹¹ Andra Day, "Rise Up."

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