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Reflections of a New Principal-Dean

Kristine Lund¹

I have been asked on several occasions, “what’s it like being Principal-Dean during a pandemic?” Given that I began as interim Principal-Dean in July 2020 and then became Principal-Dean in May 2021, I haven’t known anything else. Perhaps that’s a good thing as being Principal-Dean of an institution always has challenges, however, I’m sure the pandemic has layered in its own complexities.

Let me begin with a story. How many of you had the experience of playing in a school orchestra or band? As I’ve gotten older, I have a much greater appreciation for the conductors of bands and orchestras for students in this age group. I can hardly imagine what it is like to begin with a group of students who know nothing about playing an instrument and then work to get them to be able to perform as a group. I think it’s sort of like trying to herd cats. For me, it was a school orchestra and like many of my peers, when the conductor was rehearsing a section of the orchestra that didn’t include me and if it was taking a while, my attention would be drawn to talking with other players around me. This activity was met with the consternation of the conductor who would often launch his baton at the guilty party(ies) to get their attention. This usually was accompanied by a loud and angry rebuke to “Pay Attention!” I remember thinking at the time that this was kind of an unusual statement as from my perspective, I was paying attention. I just wasn’t paying attention to what the conductor was wanting me to pay attention to. Amazingly, rarely anyone was hit by the baton so he either had an incredibly bad throw or had a very good aim. I imagine that kind of behaviour wouldn’t be tolerated in today’s school system. So, why am I telling this story?

Because COVID-19 has been the baton thrown at us all demanding that we pay attention! It’s not that we weren’t paying attention before the pandemic but like me in the orchestra rehearsal, we were paying attention to what interested us or what we felt was important. The pandemic has drawn our attention to several other things. It has revealed crises in most areas of our lives: health care, education, democracy, economics, racism, access to stable housing, food scarcity, industrialized food production, drug addiction, and climate change, to just name a few. It wasn’t that these issues weren’t present before the pandemic, but COVID-19 has demanded that we pay attention because we are discovering what was considered “normal” before the pandemic was really only normal for a privileged few.

Two years ago, no one in post-secondary education could have imagined how education would be impacted by this very small virus, COVID-19. Afterall, researchers estimate the virus’s diameter to be somewhere around 0.1 μm .² Yet, our world has been profoundly impacted by something microscopic in size. While the pandemic catapulted us

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² <https://www.news-medical.net/health/The-Size-of-SARS-CoV-2-Compared-to-Other-Things.aspx#:~:text=Upon%20analysis%20of%20negative%2Dstained,50%20nm%20to%20140%20nm>. Retrieved July 13, 2021.

into new ways of being and doing without a manual, it has also provided us an opportunity to re-imagine and re-construe theological education. Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, compared theological education to learning about “the world that faith trains you to inhabit.”³ As he says, “if we are to re-imagine theological education for a post-pandemic context, we cannot but think of it as landscape we are moving into.⁴ And as we do, we must survey the landscape. Where are the hills and the valleys, the rivers and the rivulets, the forests and the dry lands, the conservation and the wilderness? And how will we water and care for this land? Martin Luther University College is in the process of surveying the landscape so that it can imagine and implement a program that engages “the head, heart and the legs”⁵ of our students.⁶

Liminal Space

Post-secondary education has been in a time of transition for a few years where attention has been given to the kinds of credentials that are offered, the relevance of master level degrees and the emergence of new “micro-credentials.” Some might say we are living in a liminal space, a time of in-betweenness, between endings and new beginnings. Liminality comes from the Latin word *limen* meaning “a threshold.” Arnold van Gennep coined the term liminality in his book *Rites de Passage*, published in 1909. He developed his concept of liminality studying rites of passage, recognizing in these rituals there is a passage from one situation to another like leaving home and beginning university, passages of time such as a birthday, or passage of place like moving to another city. Victor Turner who came across van Gennep’s work in 1963, began to expand the concept of liminality to the work he was doing with tribal and nontribal societies in Zambia. He noted that liminality, “served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way liminality shaped personality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience.”⁷ Agnes Horvath in 2013,⁸ argued that the concept of a liminal situation can also be applied to entire societies that are going through a crisis. It is a time of uncertainty that involves entire civilizations. So, the concept of liminality has come over time to be applied in a variety of contexts.

We can see that the global pandemic we have been experiencing for most of the last year is such a liminal experience that is global in scope. And in this way, it is different than anything we have experienced before since most of us were not alive for the Spanish flu epidemic in the early 1900s. Susan Beaumont observes that liminal time is not the same as intentional change. In times of intentional change, the leader(s) know the current situation and can articulate the desired change. However, in liminal time there is a sense that change is occurring but not a clear understanding of the outcome. She writes, “...the endpoint is

³ Benjamin D. Wayman, “Imagining the future of theological education,” *The Christian Century* 138, No. 4 (2021): 21.

⁴ Wayman, “Imagining the Future,” 21.

⁵ Wayman, “Imagining the Future,” 23.

⁶ Write up for Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative – Luther’s submission for a Lilly grant April, 2021.

⁷ Bjørn Thomassen, “Notes towards an Anthropology of Political Revolutions,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, No. 3 (2012): 679-706. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23274538>

⁸ Agnes Horvath, *Modernism and Charisma* (London: Palgrave, 2013).

fuzzy. Liminal seasons require us to build the bridge as we walk on it.”⁹ And, it is this uncertainty that has throughout the pandemic led people to long to go back to “normal.” And yet, we are also becoming more aware of how what was ‘normal’ was only really working for select groups. Creation has been suffering, black, indigenous, people of colour, those living in long term care, youth, those living with mental illness, drug addiction or other challenges, the underemployed and unemployed, the homeless etc. were not experiencing what had been defined as “normal” before the pandemic. Our whole world is going through a crisis and it seems that so much has been disrupted. It would be easy to slip into despair. And many have as we hear the increase in anxiety and depression, domestic violence, addictions etc. And yet, we also know in times of crises there are also opportunities. Some opportunities are more personal in nature, like I enjoy playing with my kids, or going out for walks, or learning something new, or businesses which have pivoted into new ventures, faith communities who have learned different ways to support and care for each other etc. So, we are reminded that within crises, there are also opportunities.

Liminal time is not unusual in that it can come in many forms but when it happens on such a global scale there is inevitable discomfort or dis-ease. Franciscan contemplative Richard Rohr asserts all transformation takes place in liminal spaces and “we have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of ‘business as usual’ and remain patiently on the ‘threshold’ (limen, in Latin) where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown.”¹⁰

Betwixt and Between

What does this liminal time mean for post-secondary education and for Martin Luther University College? How are we responding to being “betwixt and between?” The pandemic certainly has drawn us out of “business as usual.” In March 2020, we quickly pivoted from our normal in-person teaching format to remote learning. Faculty responded and adapted their courses to this new way of teaching and learning. Luther has long had a commitment to excellent teaching and continued to embody an institutional culture of caring through teaching to support students to prepare for their life’s work in this new format. Given the many uncertainties, and the various challenges students were facing which included: looking after elderly parents, home schooling, working from home, to only name a few of the challenges, it meant both students and faculty needed to adapt to the new demands. While there were challenges with technology including reliable internet service, “Zoom fatigue,” adapting to different learning demands there were also some surprises. Initially, faculty were concerned about how student engagement in the remote learning format would be impacted and how their ability to engage the material and participate in class might change.

Would the same learning outcomes for courses and programs be impacted? While students did have challenges engaging in the remote format, there were also many instances when student engagement was greater in the remote format. Some students who had been less involved in class discussions in person took advantage of the chat function in the course to make comments or ask questions. Other students who had not been as active in class discussions seemed more able to participate and contribute to the class discussions in the

⁹ S. Beaumont, *How to lead when you don’t know where you are going: Leading in a Liminal Season* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2019), 7.

¹⁰ Richard Rohr, as cited in Beaumont, *How to lead when you don’t know where you are going*, 4.

remote format. What contributed to this change is not completely understood and will be an interesting area to explore further. Certainly, there were needs to accommodate students and modify or offer different kinds of assignments given the different context, however, students continued to be able to engage course materials and complete the required assignments. Before the pandemic, Luther had primarily offered courses in a face-to-face format which privileges students who are able to attend a “brick and mortar” school and consequently excludes students who are unable to either move to Waterloo Region or commute to class.

Teaching in a remote format removes those barriers for students and opens Luther’s other opportunities such as worship, lectures and special events to the wider community. Professors became more comfortable in the online environment and incorporated guest speakers into their class from all over the world which greatly enhanced the student’s learning. Given our recent experience with technology, we have upgraded the technology in the classrooms to support HyFlex learning which means that students in person can learn concurrently with students in a remote format. This will greatly expand access to education at Luther both for students domestically and also to international students who are interested in Luther’s programs. It will also support individual classes to engage with students in other programs to learn together. The pandemic has opened up possibilities and has increased the level of comfort in incorporating technology into courses at Luther.

Initially, when we began teaching remotely it was never anticipated that we would continue in this format for four terms. While we anticipate transitioning back to some in-person teaching in Fall term, 2021 we continue to live with the uncertainty about the ongoing impact of COVID-19. The impact of the pandemic has challenged us in many ways and has resulted in raising questions regarding how we as an institution will be sensitive and responsive to our local context and beyond? Our world has been changed in many ways because of the pandemic. As vaccination rates increase, and case counts come down we individually and together will face several choices. What will we pay attention to as we are able to have more freedom of movement and expand our daily activities? Will we choose to ignore the experiences of others? Will we be silent in the face of hate and racism? Will we challenge white supremacy? Will I use my vote to support a better life for all, particularly those who are less advantaged? Will we use our feet and hands to work for a more just society? Or, will we slip back into ignoring the uncomfortable realities facing many in our community and beyond?

We are living in a very vulnerable and critical time and it will take all of us individually and collectively to work together to create a more just world. Recognizing the uncomfortable realities that the pandemic has exposed, two new courses have been developed for all graduate students. The courses are: Intersectionality and Indigenous Wisdom and Methodologies. These courses will support both faculty and students to engage with some of the challenges regarding racism, Canada’s history with Indigenous peoples, and other areas of equity, diversity and inclusion. While these are difficult areas of learning, the pandemic has revealed the necessity for educational institutions to support both faculty and students to learn and develop skills for engaging difficult questions and discussions.

Luther like many post-secondary educational institutions experienced an increase in applications for the upcoming academic year. The pandemic with its disruption to ‘normal’ life has many people reflecting on what is important both personally and professionally. If we think about it from the perspective of adult learning theory, the pandemic is the

“disorienting event” that is challenging us to reconsider our values, expectations, moral position, and self-concept. At the heart of transformative learning is critical reflection and critical self-reflection which includes the assessment of beliefs, feelings and values. Stephen Brookfield suggests that we need others to help us break down our frameworks of interpretation. This is what we offer at Luther: opportunities for critical reflection, discussion and opportunities to hold the questions that are emerging given the disruption of the pandemic. At Luther, we foster a community of caring to support this kind of learning and growth. These kinds of learning opportunities will be crucial as we continue to navigate the pandemic and address the significant discrepancies that have been revealed both locally and in the world.

We are very much living “betwixt and between” and how we as an institution will be with the “not knowing” so a different kind of “knowing” can emerge will be crucial as we live this liminal time. Luther’s experience of being a learning community for over a century where we have lived and grappled with questions together so we can move out into the world better informed and equipped to live meaningful lives of service to others will be a very important resource given the current challenges.