

THE ART OF THE FREEZE: A PANDEMIC LESSON IN THE VALUE OF LIMINAL SPACE

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.



I keep thinking about freeze tag.

As we move into our second stay-at-home month during the COVID-19 pandemic, I find my thoughts returning to the old-timey childhood game I played decades ago with my neighborhood friends in my Indiana hometown.

You might remember that in freeze tag, when the person who is “it” touches you, you’re frozen in place until another player tags you, setting you free again.

This period of social distancing and sheltering in place feels a little like freeze tag for those of us who are not frontline or essential workers (and I realize that if you are in one of these groups, your experience may be totally different). Many of us were busy running around, totally immersed in the demands of daily living, when we were suddenly told to freeze. And here we are, more than a month later, frozen still. In fact, according to today’s USA Today, 81 percent of us are now staying home.

One way to look at it is that we’re stuck. We can’t go anywhere. We can’t do anything. We’re immobilized by inaction and inactivity. There is truth in this viewpoint, of course. And it’s normal to feel frustrated, isolated, scared, and even depressed.

But another way to look at it is that we haven’t been frozen—we’ve been freed.

The Discomfort of Liminal Space

I’m a grief counselor and educator. For more than forty years, I’ve been working with and learning from grieving people. One lesson they’ve taught me is that while the transition from life before the death of a loved one to life after the death of a loved one is difficult for many reasons, one main reason is that human beings tend to dislike the “liminal” time in between.

Limina is the Latin word for “threshold,” the space betwixt and between. Significant loss creates this threshold. It forces us through a passageway we didn’t want to go through. When we’re in the passageway, it’s dark. We can’t see what life will be like on the other side. We’re unsettled. Our daily routines and core beliefs have been shaken, forcing us to reconsider who we are, why we’re here, and what life means.

It’s frightening and unpleasant being in liminal space, but that’s where grief takes us. It’s also where this pandemic pause has taken many of us. We’re frozen in uncertainty and perhaps fear, and we don’t like it. But if we reframe our understanding of liminal space, we might see that it’s one of the greatest opportunities of our lives.

The Freedom of Liminal Space

Now that the routines of our daily lives have been disrupted, many of us are finding ourselves with more time for mindful presence. Instead of doing, doing, doing, we can simply be.

More people are cooking. More people are taking walks and bike rides. More people are gardening and birdwatching. More people are reading books and assembling jigsaw puzzles. More families are finding ways to spend quality time together.

In other words, more people are experiencing the wonder of now. Of course, I do not mean to downplay the very real hardships that frontline workers and many families are experiencing during the pandemic. Financial challenges, illness, and family separation are understandably causing crippling anxiety and grief for some, and our fervent prayers are with them. Yet for others of us, this liminal time also has grace to offer.

Connect with us
Visit taps.org/covid

Before, we were often consumed with busywork directed at the future. We did this work so that we could get this result so that we would earn this reward so that we could not only feed, clothe, and shelter our families—but also so that we could maybe enjoy a few days' vacation a couple months from now. Then climb back on the hamster wheel and repeat.

This liminal space we're living in right now may not seem quite as glamorous or exotic as the vacation setting we had in mind for 2020, but it provides us with similar opportunities to revel in (rather than escape from) the most meaningful and genuine aspects of our lives. So what are the most meaningful and genuine aspects of your life? Now is your chance to ask yourself this question.

What's more, this liminal time is helping us relinquish the illusion that we're in control of our lives. Instead, we're learning to be present to our lives and whatever happens each day. If we simply show up each morning with nonjudgmental awareness and a sense of gratitude, no matter what happens, we can trust that we will be privileged to experience the miracles in every moment.

After the Freeze

Whenever something significant happens in our lives, there is the “before” and there is the “after.” Right now we're in the prolonged, in-between liminal time, but eventually we will make our way to the “after” of this pandemic. Eventually we will become unfrozen.

So what will happen when we're unfrozen? Will we go back to our previous workstyle and lifestyle, or will we slow down? In other words, will we be changed? If we've used our liminal time to become more mindful, connect deeply with loved ones, be instead of do, better understand what is most meaningful to us, relinquish control, and foster gratitude, we will indeed be different.

After the freeze, we will have an opportunity to live out our newfound awarenesses rather than falling back into the same old patterns of behavior. We will know ourselves better and be able to place our core beliefs and values at the center of our activities. We will feel more assuredness about why we're here and what we have to offer. We'll be better equipped to forge new paths or reinvest in once-cherished relationships or activities that we set aside for too long.

But for now, we are in still in the liminal space of this pandemic. And where I live, the sun is shining, the crabapple blooms will soon burst open, and even though my “normal” life has been frozen, I think I will go for a walk.



About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is an author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He is a member of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) Board of Advisors and he serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition. He is also on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, best-selling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart After A Military Death*, co-authored with TAPS.

Visit taps.org and centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning.

