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Liminality: Niagara Falls Dan Cozort

A limen is literally a threshold, separating outside from inside or marking the transition between two rooms. Many things such as persons, places, and times are “liminal” in nature. They are those things that are ambiguous, shifting, and indeterminate. Liminal places, for instance, are located at edges or interstices. Some places are visibly liminal. The plains give way to foothills, the threshold to the mountains. A river or sea might be the threshold between political states. Crossroads are places to shift direction. An airport is a threshold to a destination.

But some liminal places are less obviously so. They lie not between two physical entities but rather lie at the edge of the invisible sacred and visible profane. The holy mountain’s peak brushes the heavenly realms that stretch invisibly above it. The sacred lake hides divine beings in its murky depth. The icons in the screen of an Orthodox church are a membrane against which the Holy presses.

Niagara Falls is a liminal place both in the visible and secular world and between the sacred and profane. The Niagara River is itself liminal, separating the land on one side from the land on the other. Its surface is also liminal; the smooth swath of water

touches the air as it reflects the sky. Boats and other floating objects are supported as they too are liminal, being both in air and water. The falls themselves have another kind of liminality, that of water flowing through air.

The Niagara Falls are liminal also because they are awesome; they awaken awe, the religious perception of the “numinous.” The *numinous* is that reality which is hidden, unmanifest, yet felt. It is the complement to the “phenomenal,” that reality which appears. Rudolph Otto, studying religious experiences around the world, summarized it as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*: powerful, mysterious, riveting; awesome, urgent, and uncanny. The unseeable depth of the river, its massive flow, the roar of its crash into the abyss have intrigued, astonished, and magnetized visitors for millennia. Still, Niagara Falls is both “*numinous*” and definitely “phenomenal”; it is a phenomenon that strongly suggests the *numinous*, that is at once phenomenal and noumenal. It is a “hierophany,” a phenomenon in which a religious person can find the holy.

Human beings are drawn to liminal places, places where two realities can be experienced, perhaps where the sacred can be felt. The deliberate journey to a liminal place is a pilgrimage, and pilgrims become liminal people, people of the threshold, when they undertake that journey.

As Patrick McGreevy shows in *Imagining Niagara: the Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls*, the Falls functioned as a pilgrimage point for Europeans and Euro-Americans since at least 1721, when four French officers traveled from Montreal for the expressed purpose of seeing them. The Falls may have had a similar draw for the Seneca Indians who then lived in the area, but we do not know. In any case, the coming of railroads and the construction of the Erie Canal made the Falls accessible to the general public, and during the nineteenth century more and more pilgrims found their way there.

As McGreevy notes, many of the deeply religious people who were attracted to Niagara Falls saw them as a potent demonstration of God's own majesty and power (McGreevy 33). He quotes Abraham Coles, a New Jersey doctor, who thought they replaced Jerusalem as a place of communication with God (McGreevy 33). As more and more people experienced the Falls as a sacred zone, Pope Pius IX was urged to recognize it formally. The Falls became an official pilgrimage site in 1861 when he established a pilgrimage shrine there. Archbishop Lynch of Toronto wrote that of the few sanctuaries established in the New World, Niagara would be "the first of the most famous" (McGreevy 34).

To safeguard the experience of the Falls and shield it from commercial exploitation, the State of New York and the Province of Ontario established "reservations" in 1885 and 1887. For James C. Carter, who played a large role in this effort, the reservations were a "sanctuary" in which there would be "no ordinary human pursuits and claims" so that "pilgrims" could come "to worship, to adore." One pilgrim was Nathaniel Hawthorne, who bought what he called a "pilgrim staff" at an Indian souvenir shop and approached the Falls with religious awe (Sears 13). Open registers kept at Table Rock, at the brink of the Falls, in the 1830's and 1840's preserved the spiritual experiences of many devout travelers.

Liminal places transform pilgrims into liminal people. Awestruck observers lose their nationality, their religion, their status; famous or forgotten, young or old, they are reduced to mere creaturehood in the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. This gives rise to another characteristic of liminality: *communitas*, a fellowship based on common humanity rather than status. The individual figures in the mass of blue ponchos on the Maid of the Mist share their mounting excitement with strangers as the boat approaches the base of Horseshoe Falls.

Is it any coincidence that liminal people are drawn to the Falls? For much of the past two centuries, the Falls have been a destination for couples. Newlyweds are classic liminalists; they have crossed into the space between the life of singles and the life of householders and, in that space, are suspended in the bliss of their union before they face quotidian pressures. Their liminal moment is idealized as a sweet month, a honey-moon, where they pause and contemplate the rush of the river of married life into which they are about to plunge.

But there is another Niagara Falls threshold, one to a darker place, and liminal people are found there as well. The Falls inspire some to look up to God, but draw others to gaze down to death. The Falls have been a magnet for as long as we have records for those who would cast themselves into the abyss and perish in a spectacular descent. At Niagara Falls, the "river of life" abruptly ends in a cascade of mist and rainbows. The brink, the threshold, is a place for all of us to thrill to the evident danger, to contemplate death and what lies beyond.

Many have been drawn past it. Far more suicides have occurred at the Falls than at any other spot in North America. Others who have been pulled from the river before going over have said that they felt no intention of committing suicide but had been drawn

irresistibly, as if mesmerized, to the water until they had fallen in (McGreevy 46). Preventative measures—telephone hotlines and fences—have slowed but not stopped the suicides. Thus Niagara Falls is “home” to the most liminal of persons, the spirits of the dead, who are felt by some to hover in the area, no longer among the living but unable, apparently, to move on.

There is another Niagara Falls: a town. It is liminal, too, located at the edge of the United States facing another town named Niagara Falls in Ontario. But more importantly it is liminal because its identity has become indistinct. Niagara Falls, New York, once stood for industrial virility and was unambiguously a symbol of human culture. Now, having gradually been pushed to the margins of American society, it is a not-quite-post-industrial no-man’s-land.

It has been a slow descent. In the nineteenth century, some who witnessed the power of the Falls understood how to capture the power of the river that flowed to them. The same year in which the Pope established a Niagara Falls pilgrimage shrine saw the opening of a new canal stretching from the river just above the Falls to the river just below it. By 1885, mills and factories crowded its length (Strand 140). The Niagara Falls Power Company plants soon followed, and in the eyes of some visitors, such as H.G. Wells, surpassed the natural wonders nearby with their turbines and dynamos (Strand 167).

Cheap power drew more industries, particularly those that used electricity to achieve chemical reactions. In 1925, Niagara Falls was the nation’s leader in the manufacture of batteries, alloys such as aluminum, caustics, and chlorinated chemicals used in products such as pesticides, insecticides, and solvents (Strand 174-75). World War II caused a boom in their production and provided the impetus for new products such as those for chemical warfare (Strand 179).

But after the war, some factories relocated to find cheaper wages or lower taxes. Then the bottom literally fell out: many companies fled after a landslide in 1956 destroyed the Schoellkopf Power Plant (Strand 262). Between 1960 and 2000, Niagara

Falls lost more than half of its jobs and almost half of its population. It also became, in the late 1970’s, synonymous with environmental degradation when it came to light that an entire neighborhood, including a school and a swimming pool, was built on toxic waste. William Love’s abandoned canal from the 1890’s became a dumping ground for the Hooker Chemical Company for about ten years beginning in 1942, after which it was filled with dirt and acquired by the Niagara Falls school board, which ignored advice not to build on the site.

Only the tourist industry has prospered (but not greatly, and not nearly as it has in Canada) and consequently the city of Niagara Falls continues to crumble. Potholes, tilting sidewalks, boarded up homes, vacant storefronts, empty malls, and shoddy attractions are everywhere. It struggles to become post-industrial (technology, tourism, conventions) but is up against daunting odds.

Some are attempting to restore the image of the city by invoking Frederick Olmsted, the visionary nineteenth century landscape architect who fought for the establishment of the Niagara Reservation (now

State Park) to preserve the natural beauty of the Falls and its surround. They are trying to force the removal of an egregious blight, that portion of the deteriorating four-lane Robert Moses Parkway that skirts the gorge. They would topple the newly refurbished Prospect Point observation tower and remove food vendors, the fiberglass climbing wall beneath the Discovery Center, and the maintenance building near the rim. Others (the Seneca Nation) are bringing a controversial post-industrial enterprise—casino gambling—to downtown Niagara Falls, hoping to compete with the many large casinos already operating on the Canadian side.

But none of these efforts, even if successful, can restore either the natural state that existed before the town or the vibrant life that once gave Niagara Falls, New York, a swagger. Both town and falls are likely to continue to be liminal and attract liminal people to them.

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