

Surgery as Ceremony

There is nothing that says “Severance” quite as starkly as standing in a hideous and shapeless blue hospital gown, holding a brown paper bag with everything you were wearing just moments before, and stepping out into an empty, cold hospital hallway at 5 in the morning. Gripping the gown hoping to control the gaping back-end problems they are notorious for, I was naked, stripped down of all defining possessions, and jewelry, as well as my familiar list of “things to do today.” I am certain many of you know what I am talking about.

Yet, having experienced Rites of Passage and been blessed with the gifts of the Vision Fast, I was far more prepared than the average person for an open-heart surgery. I had a deep context that gave meaning to my journey, the company of others who understood, and a path for my return. That was years ago, yet the support that came from approaching surgery from within the stages of Severance, Threshold and Incorporation has never been forgotten. I am happy to say I have also helped prepare others for surgery in particular, as well as other huge life challenges, from this direct experience.

My hope is that you, too, will be able to assist family members and friends with this knowledge you may have forgotten you are privileged to have.

Severance

We hear the words, although they do not sink in fully yet. We feel a flash of emotion, or numbness. Data keeps coming in, although no one can really tell we are barely capable of absorbing it:

“You need open heart surgery.”

“You have a serious cancer and will need chemotherapy.”

“You have a brain tumor.”

“You have a degenerative disease.”

All of life’s huge episodes require that we pass through many doorways. Life as we knew it changes forever and how we respond to this reality will shape the entire journey. In this severance stage, we may grieve, feel great fear, do tons of research, ignore it, wail and cry, rage against our bad luck, be stoic, fall apart, feel guilty, or cycle through all of them in no particular order. For some, it throws life into chaos. Some approach it methodically and systematically. But, as in any Passage, we are indeed severing from the life we had. We need to say good-bye and begin our preparations to find the willingness to step over the next Threshold. You have been called, like it or not.

As Steven and Meredith said in [The Book of the Vision Quest](#), “From the moment you commit yourself, you begin to set your house in order, square yourself with friends and loved ones, and review your former life as if it had come to an end.” That is exactly what you do with a big upcoming surgery, and hopefully you are lucky

enough to have some time to prepare. Preparations must be made; for work, for the kids, pets, the garden. If you are lucky, and have access to this understanding we are all blessed to have in this community, you turn into it and find the YES. You are preparing for a Big Ceremony! As the threshold time approaches, your fear and anxiety may intensify.

Driving to the hospital in the dark at 4AM, on a windy and rainy day, I asked my husband to stop the car and pull over. I stepped alone out into the dark wind and put my hands on the earth. Then I stood and turned in the 4 directions and offered my prayers to each and once more put my palms flat on the moist ground. NOW, I was ready to go. This was my first step towards the threshold, approaching Sacred Time.

Threshold

Walking through the first steps of hospital admittance felt like liminal space: neither here nor there, nor anywhere, really. Dreamlike, in between worlds, open and scared, shaky and willing. Not unlike stepping towards the Threshold circle on the morning of being smudged out! "Do I have to do this, really??" Coming out of the room with my brown paper bag felt like the next big Threshold step.

No turning back now... Again, as our teachers Meredith and Steven wrote: "Now the cord binding you to your former life must be severed. You will cut the cord by actually entering the passage. This is an auspicious and powerful moment. An invisible door stands before you...Eventually you are forced to pay attention to eternity...past, present and future become Now. And Now is defined as physical (south), psychological (west), mental (north), imaginative (east), mortal (earthward), and spiritual (skyward). All directions become one in Now."

Knowing I was in a Ceremony, and many ceremonies within this larger Life Ceremony, helped me stay calm, to remain as open as I could, and to submit. Before I knew it, my family was kissing me good bye and one of my Vision Fast friends reminded me that she would be "holding basecamp" for me as I wandered in the underworld of anesthesia. My eyeglasses now surrendered (huge for me!), needles delivering the sleeping potions, I left conscious knowing and put myself in the hands of God as well as an excellent surgeon and team.

Incorporation

My first conscious thought was that my nurse was an angel (literally), followed quickly by sheer panic and frustration that I still had a breathing tube in me. And then pain....will I ever feel better?

Walking into basecamp, after a fast, the angels of basecamp have a glorious breakfast ready: oh joy! Then, bit by bit...oh, do I even have a story? What even happened out on the mountain? I am confused, disoriented... will I ever understand?

Physicians do not prepare patients adequately for the incorporation stage of surgery. They under-estimate the pain, the time needed to really heal, the emotional rollercoasters and the changing identity. Surgeons are Threshold guides, after all, not well versed in Incorporation. They do not understand the stumbles, struggles and doubts of living into a new body. But we do, and we can bring this knowledge to our loved ones; give them a sense of this terrain.

Three months after my surgery, I did a ceremony marking this stage of the surgery was complete. Living into new life did, indeed, take a full year, and I crossed several thresholds during that time. But how much more profound and helpful it was to have a map. What a blessing to be able to bring this sense of the Sacred to a world (the hospital) that often seems devoid of that. How much my healing was assisted by knowing these stages, and that they each have tasks and a timing all their own, and would bit by bit deliver me to the next stage.

Mine was straightforward. Many are not so fortunate. A degenerative disease brings threshold after threshold, and an entirely different trajectory of incorporation. With repeated rounds of chemotherapy, this process must be repeated over and over. Sometimes the threshing time lasts for years. We can help others bravely take on the task of continually returning to a new and changed life.

As Rites of Passage guides, we are blessed with experience and knowledge that may serve if we are sensitive and creative and open enough. We can find out what is Sacred and gives meaning to another. We can create the simplest of rituals and ceremonies to enable that deep YES from another for their particular Now. We can offer to take our people out on the land, even in their own backyard as I did with a friend who was dying of cancer. The Ceremony holds us all...my friend felt more peace and connection by being blessed over the threshold into her own beloved yard and being alone for an hour, then having her story of that time deeply witnessed, than by my just sitting and chatting with her.

Before our people even go into surgery, we might find simple ways to teach them about these stages, and help them prepare in a deeper way. When loved ones are sick or in hospital, we can bring in elements of healing, plants, beauty, music, photos, being aware they are still being threshed in the underworld and in need of gentleness. When they come home, we can help hold the trajectory of incorporation, knowing this is a big journey and helping them remember that perspective. I am haunted by people I have met in hospital waiting rooms; waiting either for their own surgery or for a loved one to return from surgery, and the terror and lack of knowledge some have...what holds them? What expands the context and lends meaning to this experience? Where is their map?

The composer John Cage said that "Music is continuous; only listening is intermittent." I think we could say something similar: we know that the Sacred and

Ceremony is the constant ground of Being; only our attention is intermittent. May we pray for deeper attention.

Sara Harris