

## Start of Year Assembly Sept 2023 - Liminality

Welcome to you all. I hope that you had a wonderfully relaxing and refreshing break. There are many in the room who join us for the first time today, whether in the Thirds, the Fourths, or the Sixth Form – to each one of you, I offer the warmest welcome. I hope you will have a wonderful time in the years ahead, and I am sure you will bring fresh talent and enthusiasm to the school. I also welcome back the more familiar faces. You had earned your rest and now you return, fresh and ready to go again.

This morning, I would like to look forward to the year ahead. We approach the new academic year having enjoyed great success. Our leavers faced one of the toughest exam years for some time, but did themselves proud. They are now off to find yet more success in the universities they have chosen. Our new Lower Sixth year, in another difficult exam season, posted our highest GCSE A\* rate in well over ten years. They have much to congratulate themselves for and can look forward to an exciting time in the Sixth Form. There was much to celebrate elsewhere - we hit the heights across the various sports and enjoyed successful tours to The West Indies and South Africa. Well done to our musicians who performed so well on tour in Spain and France, and congratulations to those of the various DoFE and CCF trips. There has been a lot of work on the school site, preparing for your return. We have many refurbished classrooms and we can look forward to our new Cricket Centre very soon. I have been inside in the last few weeks and can tell you that it is looking incredible.

All this gives us a tremendous springboard from which to approach the year ahead. We should be proud of all that we have achieved, and excited about what we will do next.

This is the time of year that I enjoy most. I like it, because we are on a hinge in the school year. I enjoy taking stock of the past, but I like it even more because this is the moment in the year that everything to come is yet possible. I can best explain what I mean with reference to Anthropology. Anthropology is the academic study of humanity. It tries to understand human behaviour and human societies.

Anthropologists have noticed that there are common behaviours across many societies and cultures, including our own. One of them is called liminality. The word comes from the Latin 'limen', meaning threshold. In its strictest sense, liminality is defined as the middle section of a three-part process. The first part is the loss of an old way of living or stage in life; the last part is the reorganisation of life into a new pattern of life or status. Liminality is the uncertain period in the middle, when we are between our previous ways of structuring identity, time, or community and the new way in which will live in the future. During this liminal period, all sorts of things that were once certain become uncertain and changeable – anything can become possible and things once taken for granted can become doubtful. Thus, liminality creates opportunities that enable all sorts of new ideas or behaviours to become established. We are at a liminal time in the school year. The past is gone, but the future is as yet unwritten. Here, at the start of the year, we are between moments.

In some societies there are established rituals and rites of passage from one state to another. In others, the arrangement is more loosely managed. But pretty much every culture does it. It seems to be a human trait – something buried deep in our collective consciousness.

Liminality can also be seen in a wider context than that of this three stage process of personal growth. We have thought about liminality in relation to time – a place in the year when things

are open to change. This is one, New Year is another. The idea of the threshold is important to liminality but thresholds do not just occur in time. They can also be found in places and in activities. Liminal spaces are a place between places, in which new things (or surprising and unusual things) are possible. Because of this uncertainty, these liminal spaces can seem rather creepy or allow behaviours that would be unacceptable elsewhere: hotels, corridors, airports, empty buildings, Las Vegas, the wood between the worlds in the Narnia books.

Then there are the liminal activities – festivals, carnivals, group travels such as pilgrimages or sports tours, even such extreme things as revolutions. In these liminal activities normal behaviour can be set aside and a spirit of novelty, even anarchy, is unleashed. You will have heard the phrase, ‘What happens on tour, stays on tour.’ That’s a very liminal thought.

Sometimes the three liminalities – time, places and activities – collide and reinforce each other. A liminal plant like the mistletoe (it grows halfway up a tree and is between earth and sky) can be placed in a liminal space (a doorway) at a liminal time of year (Christmas) to allow behaviour that might not normally be considered (the chance to kiss someone else).

Liminality is a concept that we might not know directly, but it is a concept that is firmly established in our culture and in very many others. In-betweenness seems to be very important to us.

Why do I like it? Because it is a state of becoming. It is a moment when the old order is questioned and can be overcome. And so it offers hope to us all, maybe even redemption. Here we are at a liminal moment. The start of a new academic year. A moment when everything is up for grabs. When a path can be changed and an opportunity seized. That is true for all of us in the room – it is especially true for those making a bigger transition. Those just joining the school, those embarking on a year when the GCSE courses will start, those about to enter the Sixth Form, those looking to finish their time at the school with a brilliant performance that will take them to a university or course of their choice – they face a moment of heightened liminality. It is as true for staff, and for me, as it is for pupils.

Liminality shimmers at this time of year. Alternatives hover before us. Soon the gates will shut a little and the opportunities recede if we decide to return to the old way of being rather than progressing on to the new.

But now, at this magical time of year, we have a fresh start, a new dawn, a first step before us. No wonder it is my favourite time of year. This is a golden moment.

Let’s have a great year and seize the liminal moment.