# The Marvelous Grace of Insecurity: Getting to Hopelessness

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We live in a time of profound disorientation. Some have called this 'the great unraveling.' Institutions we relied on are failing us. Millions of people have experienced radical displacement through wars, famines and droughts. And now suddenly we find the economies of the world in free-fall. To add insult to injury, our normal support systems are barely able to cope, straining under the requirement of isolation.

For churches and church leaders, the experience is not different. Our relationships are what make us a body. Yet that glue itself is tested under the solvent of these unique conditions. How do leaders lead when we can't gather? What *can* we do anyway? We are definitely not equipped to lead organizations under these conditions. We find ourselves having to adapt to these times while dealing with our own anxiety and with limited resources. Some of us may soon be out of work. We are in a time where we need a new beginning, but we are trapped in liminal space – a space between. We feel lost and not a little hopeless.

Henry Cloud in *Necessary Endings* writes of the things that prevent us from making new beginnings.[1] The problem with beginnings is that they require endings, and the complexity of our current conditions leaves us squarely in-between. We are unable to move forward or backward, and unable to find an end point. The need is for an adaptive response.

But what generates the adaptive response? Humans, like the organizations they create, are adept at denial. Sometimes reality has to sit up and smack us with a two by four. Laurence Gonzales in his book, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies and Why,* describes the predictable behaviours of lost people.

> 1. People who are lost at first deny they're lost. They're confident that they know where they are, they just can't find any familiar signs. Everything's okay, they still know where they're going, the maps are still correct. Gradually confronted with strange and unfamiliar sights, anxiety creeps in. They speed up their activity, urgently wanting to verify that they're not lost.
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> 2. At this point, doubt and uncertainty creep in. People become angry and impatient, pushing aside any information that doesn't confirm their location. They become desperate to find any bit of information that proves they know where they are. They reject all other data, and treat as enemy the information or messenger that would help them get unlost.
>
> 3. People realize they can no longer deny that they're lost. Fear and panic set in, and their brains stop working. Now every action they take is senseless, creating more fatigue and more problems.
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> 4. Confused and panicked, people search frantically for any sign that's familiar. But they *are* lost, so this strategy fails and they continue to deteriorate.

The next step is something like hopelessness, and it leads to surrender: recognizing we are out of our depth. *Paradoxically, hopelessness is sometimes exactly what we need.*

Hopelessness can move people or systems to instability, an intellectual and emotional crisis. And nothing mobilizes us like this sense that there is no solution; that we are heading for a train wreck.

But surely we all need hope for the future? Yes -- but sometimes hope becomes a magical wishing for change in the face of evidence to the contrary, a powerful force that can fuel denial. Gamblers know this problem well; *next time the wheel will fall my way.* But next time never comes. No matter the reality we face, we

[1] Henry Cloud, *Necessary Endings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010)

can hang on to some imaginary reality, some magical sense that it can't be this bad. The "hope" in hopelessness is that we are finally through denial and squarely facing reality. The experience can be mystical: a sense of abandonment to God, the moment of surrender. In AA they call it Step One: "we are powerless" and "our lives are unmanageable." Hopelessness can lead to surrender, and surrender can be the fuel that allows us to fully embrace the new reality we find ourselves in. It can empower what otherwise seemed impossible: a creative and adaptive response.

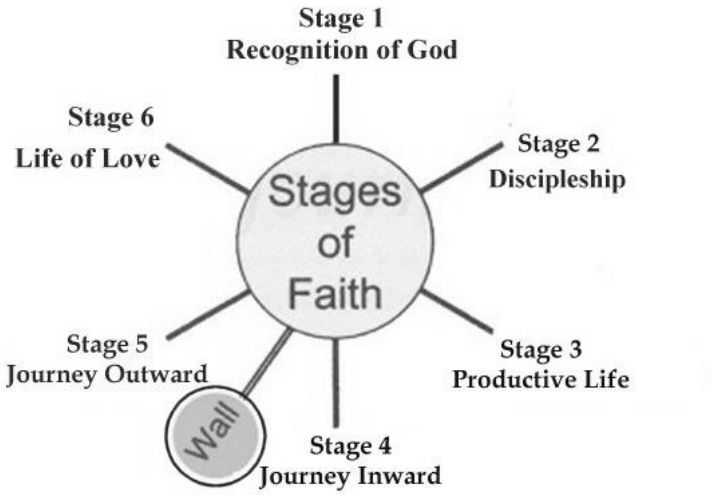
Some organizations never make it to this point; abandoning the old way is just too costly. This is particularly the case when the need doesn't seem urgent. After all, we say to ourselves, the world is still buying green widgets. Maybe we can stretch it out for two more years. Maybe the stock market will experience a massive rally. Maybe a new anti-viral agent will end our isolation and empty our hospitals. But equally likely, the unraveling will continue for many months yet.

Hitting "the wall"

> *Sometimes the best map will not guide you,*
> *You can't see what's round the bend,*
> *Sometimes the road leads through dark places*
> *Sometimes the darkness is your friend.*[2]

Most of us have had the experience of using an out-dated map. If the problem occurs in your own city on an average summer day, you can work it out. But if your discovery occurred when you were already under pressure, say, pulling into an unfamiliar town at midnight, then it was distressing. You literally don't know what is around the bend.

Yet, "sometimes the darkness is your friend." This line from a song highlights the complexity of life and growth. Transitions are rarely comfortable and are frequently complex, yet often they lead into wider, brighter spaces that would never have been found had we followed the well-trod paths.




← *Figure 2. Stages of Faith*

In *The Critical Journey* Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich describe six stages on the journey of faith. Stages three to five are of particular interest, because they describe the movement from a productive life, to a place of confusion, and from there to a new place of restful action. Our interest is in that transitional place between stages 4 and 5. They call it "the wall."

[2] Bruce Cockburn, "Pacing the Cage." From *The Charity of Night*, 1995. Golden Mountain Music Corporation. BMI.

Stage 3 is the "normal" productive life. It's busy. There are multiple and complex demands, with little time for reflection. Then something goes wrong and we are launched into liminal space. The most notable description of stage four: "Things just aren't working anymore," and "There's got to be more." I don't know how many pastors and leaders I have spoken with in the past ten years who find themselves in this squeeze.[3]

Speaking in 2007, Sharon Parks describes the experience of "shipwreck" in the lives of young adults, those times when young adults experience something unexpected or disappointing. She writes, "These experiences often became the context in which big questions emerged in powerful ways." She explains that technology has made life transitions harder than they used to be. Digital devices and social networking, "can contribute to heightened productivity and a greater connection to the global community; yet [to an] increasing sense of loneliness and isolation that leads to many mental and physical health risks."[4]

But these conditions don't apply only to young adults; they apply to leaders in a variety of struggling organizations. New realities reflect a more brittle economy. There is more at stake in choices these days, and less certainty about where the path will lead. Big questions emerge, and the answers are not apparent. The pressure to make decisions increases along with uncertainty of outcomes. The old map tells us to stay safe. Yet we desperately need leaders who will take risks, who will depend on God to lead to us to an unknown future, and who know that quick fixes only push the tough decisions further down the track.

From Dis-Orientation to Orientation

Another way of framing the transition between stage 4 and 5 is the movement from a stable state of apparent orientation, through disorientation, to *re-orientation*. When our internal maps suddenly become inadequate, the experience is one of profound disorientation. We are truly lost.

But these transition experiences are not new. Our heroes of faith were familiar with uncertainty and with disorientation. According to the author of Hebrews Abraham went out, "not knowing…"[5] Walter Brueggemann sees the movement toward uncertainty in the Psalms: the movement from orientation to disorientation.[6]

First are prayers of orientation. The words of Psalm 1 present the kind of black and white world most of us live in before the great questions rise to disturb our clay. In this simple world the good guys are blessed and the bad guys get what's coming to them. This is the pre 9/11 world, and pre-Aleppo. Then comes the crash, and suddenly we find more affinity with Lamentations. "I am the one who has seen affliction." *Where are you God?* Our questions echo a sense of abandonment, a predictable world that has become unstable. We no longer know who God is. God has become like a predator: like a vicious bear lying in wait for his victim (La. 3-5).

Our experience of sovereign presence has become something other, like *sovereign absence*.[7] If we make it through this phase, eventually we come out the far end with a different perspective. We are re-oriented to God and God's world.

> *But this I call to mind,*
> *and therefore I have hope:*
>
> *The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,*
> *His mercies never come to an end.*

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[3] Brian McLaren in *A New Kind of Christian*, stories his own journey through the wall by imagining a conversation between a mid-life pastor and an older, mature believer.

[4] "The Undergraduate Quest for Meaning, Purpose and Faith." *Spirituality in Higher Education*. Vol. 4, Issue 1. Nov. 2007

[5] Hebrews 11:8

[6] Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001)

[7] See Walter Brueggemann in *Cadences of Home: Preaching to Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997)

*They are new every morning;*
*Great is your faithfulness!* (La.3:21-24)

If we pass through the uncertainty, if we survive shipwreck, we can discover new purpose. Sharon Parks writes,

> If we do survive shipwreck – if we wash up on a new shore, perceiving more adequately how life really is – there is gladness. It is gladness that pervades one's whole being; there is a new sense of vitality, be it quiet or exuberant. Usually, however, there is more than relief in this gladness. There is transformation. We discover a new reality behind the loss…[8]

"Shipwreck" experiences are a part of the much larger journey of developing a deeper sense of meaning and purpose. They can result in a richer, more personal faith and become the foundation of new exploration. In organizations, they result in renewed engagement and energy and opening new territory, or in what is termed "a competitive advantage." Our personal sense of control was inadequate and unrealistic. We have surrendered to something larger than ourselves.

In classical spirituality, we call this experience of hitting the wall by a different name: the dark night of the soul. The hope of the Dark Night is that we are like the caterpillar weaving a cocoon and we will emerge transformed.

In the experience of the Dark Night, God seems distant and silent. But the silence is fraught with purpose. In this experience of abandonment, our soul is purged of self-motivations. The experience is one of soul-searching and of purification, the kind of desperate reflection we avoid when things are going well. And so God engineers a way for us to slow-down, perhaps even to stop. The pain gets our attention in a way that daily victory and constant activity do not.

In the Old Testament narrative Israel is led into the desert because only in this way can she learn radical dependence on God. Daily she is fed by God, given water by God, and delivered from her enemies by God. By day she is led by the cloud, and by night by the pillar of fire. God leads Israel into the desert to woo her. Exodus is a great romance. The Lord will allow no other lovers for Israel.

This is the great value of the desert; it purges us of distorted motives and wrong attachments. In the desert we detach from things and from self in order to become attached to God and His kingdom. Only after forty years in the desert is Israel ready to enter the land of promise. But what are the mechanisms God employs for this purpose? St. John and St. Gregory describe the process in terms of the wounding of the soul, of "compunction."

The word was originally a medical term, and described acute attacks of pain. Translated into the spiritual life, it describes a pain in the soul, pain that arises from two causes: the existence of sin, and our hunger for God. Compunction is an act of the Spirit in us, an act by which God awakens us. But this awakening is painful, like the thawing of a frozen limb, or the renewed use of a limb which was neglected. We are pierced by love, and the attention of the soul is recalled to God.[9] St. John of the Cross describes the process in his *Spiritual Canticle*:

*How manage breath on breath*
*So long, my soul, not living where life is?*
*Brought low and close to death*
*by those arrows of his?*
*Love was the bow. I know. I've witnesses.*

*And wounds to show. You'd cleave*
*clean to the heart, and never think of healing?*
*Steal it, and when you leave*

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[8] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams* (San Francisco: Jossey- Bass, 1999) 29.
[9] Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982) 30

*leave it? What sort of dealing,*
*to steal and never keep, and yet keep stealing?*[10]

The most prominent characteristic of the poems of compunction are paradox. We attempt to describe spiritual truth in human language, and end up with contradictions. "Steal and keep stealing; wounds of love…" these categories are paradoxical, but not unfamiliar in our experience. Any lover knows the wounding of the soul, a desire that seems insatiable, the experience of awakening as if from sleep when suddenly all the world seems new. Suddenly the ego is suppressed and we think of nothing but the good of the one we love. Our own needs seem unimportant. The beloved is all in all. What but love can wean us away from the enticement of this world? This was the essence of the monastic testimony, that "God is not known if not loved." Bernard of Clairvaux writes,

> Your blessings and love are like hands and feet to help me gently move toward You and Your absolute and sovereign love. But such an experience is not to be enjoyed with unmitigated pleasure. Instead, it is one of yearnings, struggles, and frustrations, mixed with bitter sweetness…
>
> So when my eyes of introspection get confused, dim, and even blind, I pray that You will open them quickly; not in shame as Adam's eyes were opened. Rather, may they be opened to behold Your glory (Exodus 33:18). Then, forgetting all about my own poverty and insignificance, my whole being may be able to stand up, to run into Your embrace of love, and see You whom I love, and love You whom I have yet to see…[11]

The Dark Night is a gift to us: a gift intended to bring wakefulness and humility. When leaders and faith communities are in decline, they begin to ask new questions, deep questions, about motivation, about ends and means, and about control. The Lord engineers the journey so that our eyes are lifted above our own needs and the small kingdoms we build to the eternal kingdom he alone can build.

The disorientation arrives for the purpose of renewal. God puts to death what is earthly in us so that his life can fill us, and so that eventually we can renew our ministry and mission with our sole aim to please our Master. We feel caught. The call is to enter a holding space – a place between. There is no going back and no going forward. It is neither movement from nor towards.

But neither is it empty space: it is God space, *sacred space*. In the paradoxical reality of spiritual life, at the still point we discover the dance. We can freely embrace God's gift of liminality. You aren't lost; *you are right here.*

Can we learn to swim between two worlds? Can we learn to dwell in the space where we are not in control and we don't know the answers? Can we answer God's call to be where we are?

When my children were young, they enjoyed all kinds of games. But we evolved one game I never really understood. When I was lounging around, they loved to come and sit on my lap. Sometimes as a kind of hug, I would put my arms around them and grip their ankles and hold them in a vice grip. They would squeal and struggle. But so long as they were small enough to sit on my lap, I was strong enough that they could not break free. They loved this game! But what was it really about?

Now much later in my life, I understand the game. I realize that there was a security in their inability to move. They learned a kind of surrender to the strength of a father. That strength was reassuring to them – it told them they were safe under my care. They believed their dad could handle anything. Of course it was an illusion: but their experience of my strength helped them build a foundation of trust that enabled them to begin to take risks in the world and grow their trust in God.

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[10] *The Poems of St. John of the Cross.* Trans. John Frederick Nims. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 5.
[11] Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Love of God* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1983) 112.

We may feel trapped in this strange location, unable to move. But when we are ready, the Lord will teach us of our weakness and his strength. Then we can enter a new kind of stillness. And when we are ready again, he'll let go.

The Welsh poet David Whyte writes,

> Courage is the ability to cultivate a relationship with the unknown;
> to create a form of friendship with what lies around the corner over the horizon –
> with those things that have not yet fully come into being… [12]

Liminal space is space between, a nowhere land where entire church communities now find themselves. It's a frightening place where we feel we are lost, wandering without a map. But it's also a place that is pregnant with possibility. Just as the horizon is not a horizon without the space between where we stand and the land far off, so our ability to occupy the space between grants meaning to the place we stand. Eventually it is that space that anchors our ability to launch out to new lands.

Today we are swimming between tectonic plates. We experience the shaking and we share the anxiety of those around us. Rather than manage the crisis, sometimes the wisest action is to find a way to withdraw and to rest. In the West we equate stillness with inactivity. In biblical thought emptiness and stillness open space. We "cease striving" so that we can discover God.

> There is an age when one teaches what one knows.
> But there follows another when one teaches
> what one does not know…
> It comes, maybe now, the age of another experience:
> that of unlearning… [13]



Adapted from *Broken Futures: Churches and Leaders Lost in Transition.* Urban Loft Publishers, 2018

[12] *Crossing the Unknown Sea*, Riverhead Books, 1998
[13] Roland Barthes