



FOREWORD BY  
CATHLEEN FALSANI

THE  
WINDING  
PATH OF  
TRANSFORMATION

FINDING YOURSELF BETWEEN  
GLORY AND HUMILITY

JEFFREY TACKLIND

Taken from *The Winding Path of Transformation* by Jeffrey Tacklind.  
Copyright © 2019 by Jeffrey Tacklind. Published by InterVarsity Press,  
Downers Grove, IL. [www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).

# AT HOME IN THE MIDDLE PLACE

**A** FEW MONTHS AGO, I WAS WALKING in Mill Creek Canyon when I heard God's voice. I had been given an assignment: find a symbol in nature that spoke to me of my current spiritual state. As I got up and began to head out the door of the cabin and into the rocky streambed, I have to admit it was with some foot-dragging.

As a pastor, I have seen the value of such experiential exercises, and I've led plenty myself. But I've never liked having to participate in them. As I began to walk, I already had decided how I would complete the task with both an object and explanation that would be sufficient to share with the group.

That might sound more cynical than I intend. It wasn't unbelief that left me resigned to simply completing the task. I was exhausted. Ministry and life had been taking a toll on my heart. With reluctance I strode out into the canyon, my heart empty, my ears closed, and my eyes looking downward to keep from stumbling.



Someone once asked me how I, personally, recognize the voice of God.

How do I distinguish between the divine whisper and my own wishful or sometimes fearful thinking? Is there really a difference?

A fair question.

I've noticed from time to time that God's voice and mine do have similarities in tone. Often I mistake them at first, God's words as my own. But, in the end, I'm learning that there is a distinct difference. God's words seem to enter my mind from my peripheral vision. They present themselves—unlooked for—and they take me by surprise.

As I considered how to respond to the question, the word that came immediately to mind was *resistance*. When I hear God speak, it's rarely what I'm hoping to hear. My ego flares. I feel defensive, self-protective, and guarded.

Often I'm disappointed because my agenda feels hijacked, my plans are interrupted, and my ambitions cast aside. There is an uncomfortable, even invasive, truthfulness to the words, opening doors I'd rather remain closed, and taking me places I'd rather not go. God's voice asks more of me than I desire to give.

But that's not all I feel. Almost as strong as my resistance and disappointment is a paradoxical leap of the heart. That small, true self steps forward from the shadows with longing and hope. In a burst of courage, childlike dreams emerge and reawaken.

God is here. We are on holy ground.



As I walked along the rocky middle ground of Mill Creek, I became aware of the opposing cliffs rising steeply on either side of me. The creek runs almost perfectly east to west, resulting in two very different ecosystems on the north and south sides. The north-facing side remains predominantly shaded and therefore is covered with evergreens, mainly ponderosa pines and incense cedars. On the other side of the canyon—the sunny side—there are oaks, manzanitas, and even cacti. Two very different worlds carved in half by a meandering stream and barren quarry.

The creek bed was wide, disproportionately so. The creek itself was maybe five feet across, while the creek bed was probably two hundred.

The banks rose at least fifteen or twenty feet on each side. You'd never guess that much water could fill this valley bank to bank, but I've seen it happen. Sometimes years go by without a flash flood, but when it comes the creek is transformed into a raging torrent. Boulders the size of cars go thundering along, tossed about with ease. The power of those floods is both captivating and terrifying.

But most days it looks just like this. A meandering brook. A quiet, still, middle place separating two very different worlds.



Back home, I am the pastor of a small church in Laguna Beach, California. It's an eclectic and eccentric, diverse and charming faith community. It also is quirky, difficult, reactive, and dysfunctional—just as all churches are to one extent or another. Our church comprises people from many different Christian tribes, from Pentecostals, staunch fundamentalists and contemplatives, to charismatics, traditionalists, and progressives. We have people who regularly speak in tongues, and others who believe such spiritual displays are a bunch of nonsense.

We hang in there, like families do. And we continue, together, to hold. To me, that alone is evidence of God's grace.

The church itself wasn't the source of my exhaustion. I was.

Standing in the threshold of midlife, with the repetitiveness of fourteen years invested in one place and the vast rest of my life bearing down on me, I was holding steady, but my fingers were starting to cramp. I felt like I was constantly being buffeted and worn down. So on my scavenger hunt for a totem to represent my torpor, I decided to pick up a smooth stone from the creek bed. I could spin that in a positive direction. Something about how God was removing my abrasive exterior, and, over time, polishing me into something beautiful.

It was true enough. I knew that God was with me in my struggle. But this is what happens when ministry becomes vocation. It becomes your job to produce insightful metaphors and images and to share them with just the right amount of vulnerability and humility. It becomes rote. It becomes disengaged from the heart.

The truth was, I was lonely. I still am. Deep down I just wanted to belong instead of constantly finding myself somewhere in the middle.

My name—Jeffrey—means “peacemaker.” But for many years my parents felt they’d misnamed me. I’m a questioner, maybe to a fault. I never could let ideas just be. I picked at them and turned them upside down. It was curiosity and a need to understand, at least at its best. But I had a tendency to wear out the patience of my teachers and instructors and friends.

Over the years, I was learning that this quality was suited to finding the truth in the middle of things. In philosophy, this is referred to as the *via media*. It is a middle way or compromise between extremes. For some reason, this is always where I ended up. In between views. Seeing the value in both sides but not entirely convinced by either. I’ve learned that this is a lonely place to live, but that it carries with it a unique value.

Most people are largely unaware that they have a bias. It is therefore helpful to have an objective, questioning voice in the discussion, leading opposing sides to a kind of reconciliation or compromise. This is a form of peacemaking. But I’ve also seen that the resolution it creates never is quite enough to completely satisfy either side, equally pleasing and displeasing to both parties. It leaves the peacemaker alone at the center—with a foot in both camps—belonging to neither.



As I walked the middle place of the creek, stumbling from rock to rock, my heart felt as dry as the mounds of sand and quartz. I surveyed

the different worlds on either side of me, realizing my deep yearning to belong somewhere—to pick a side and sink my roots there. To escape this middle ground. To settle into that place of comfortable orthodoxy. To stop asking questions. To stop seeing the value in the opposing arguments. To stop listening with empathy to the other side.

As a pastor, I'm often asked to weigh in on matters of controversy and confusion. One such issue recently had arisen in my church and congregants were desperate for me to state clearly my own position. They wanted to know where I stood, but weren't particularly interested in my insight or perspective. The underlying question was a form of "are you with me, or against me?"

Often, in moments such as these, my go-to defense is to stand behind a recognized outside authority. C. S. Lewis is my go-to. Very few people are willing to write him off, and he, better than anyone I have read, has navigated the middle places of theology with grace and aplomb. But in this case, I felt I was on new ground, on my own. With all the personal integrity I could muster, I simply stated, "It's complicated." I said more words than that, but, in the end, that was the gist. My answer pleased no one and seemed to disappoint everyone.

Dallas Willard wrote about peacemakers in *The Divine Conspiracy*. He was discussing an alternative reading of the Beatitudes, where "blessed are" instead is translated "blessed even are." He goes through each of the Beatitudes verse by verse. When he gets to peacemakers he has this to say:

They make the list because outside the kingdom they are, as is often said, "called everything but a child of God." That is because they are always in the middle. [Ask the policeman called in to smooth out a domestic dispute. There is no situation more dangerous.] Neither side trusts you. Because they know that you are looking at both sides, you can't possibly be on their side.

The matter I was struggling with hardly would qualify as a police dispute, but it was certainly domestic. These were my people, my family. We are a small church. Any split or tear draws blood. As fear and even suspicion replaced a look of trust in the eyes, the pain I felt wasn't simply a need to belong. Part of it was the despair that comes from watching two opposing sides completely miss each other in the discussion. Members of each side hold fast to a cherished value that they have built into a fortified position that members of the other side fail to see because they are too busy constructing and defending their own position and argument. An almighty disconnect is the end result when logical trajectories never seem to intersect with each other, except to criticize and reject one another as they go flying past.

Alasdair MacIntyre used the metaphor of a map in his book *After Virtue*. Each of us holds pieces of a map, the entirety of which has been destroyed. All that we have left are fragments with no way of connecting them together. There often seems to be no hope of recovering the larger meaning or *telos*, as he calls it. This system is damaged irreparably.

When I have this feeling of despair, it is hard to shake. Things feel stuck, helpless. I don't know where to begin. I'm at the end of my rope.

It is always at this very point that I am tempted to give in and placate. I compromise my position and move towards the more conservative side of my upbringing. This might even appear to be something like wisdom, but really, deep down, it is more of a wanting to fit in somewhere I know I don't fully belong. It might last for a brief season, but it never provides what my heart longs for most deeply: true belonging and unconditional love that isn't based on how I performed (or didn't) on any given Sunday.

There is an image in Scripture that I always have found moving. It comes from the book of Isaiah where it says,



They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
a planting of the LORD  
for the display of his splendor.” (Isaiah 61:3)

How I long to be that righteous oak, with roots spread wide. Strong and resilient. Enduring through the years. Trustworthy.



And then I heard God speak to me in that lonely middle place. God simply said, “This is who you are.” I looked up and in front of me was this thin, white tree, standing alone in the midst of the creek bed. A white alder. It caught me off guard.

*This tree? This unimpressive, wan, frail-looking specimen?*

My heart pushed back, resisting the image and the calling that came with it. It wasn't just the tree itself that made me withdraw, but where it grew, this rocky middle place. To sink roots here was to plant myself in the place of loneliness. Something in me writhed in protest, refusing to go quietly.

I realized that one of the things that kept me going, even when I felt exhausted, was the temporality of my current calling. This middle place I presently inhabited was a season, a chapter, which soon would pass. That my identity and calling should be symbolized by a white alder burst that illusion of temporality, this dream of picking a side on which to belong and joining it permanently. Because I knew something about this tree. For one thing, it cannot survive anywhere except here, in the creek bed. It requires too much water to live anywhere else. This is its weakness. It is so dependent on a constant water supply that it withers as it moves farther away from its source of nourishment.

It cannot leave the river and hope to survive. It is too thirsty.

And yet, the white alder alone remains in this barren space. This is because of several unique strengths the tree possesses that allow

it to endure where other trees are uprooted and perish. For one, it is incredibly flexible. When the floods come, it concedes. It bends, sometimes completely over, only to straighten again as the torrent subsides. Everything else in the path of the flood is stripped away as the deluge of water rises bank to bank. The larger oak is incapable of bending. Even a strong wind can break off its large branches, whereas the saturated wood of the alder yields.

But it is not simply the pliability of the alder wood that allows it to remain. Its root system also is distinct. It possesses what is called a taproot: essentially the trunk of the tree continues to grow down and down, digging deeper and deeper in its thirst for more of the water it needs to survive. Not only does the taproot allow the alder to endure the floods, it also allows the tree to survive when the creek's water level is at its lowest. Oak and pine trees have breadth but not necessarily depth. Their shallower root systems cannot endure the barrenness of the middle place when the soil and nourishment they need have been leached away.

Staring at the lone white alder, I could feel my heart change. The resistance abided, but as I felt God's demand on my life increasing beyond my own strength and resources of love and energy, a childlike leap also arose, fueled by joy that springs from the affirmation only God can give. It makes me think of God's word to Jeremiah,

If you have raced with men on foot  
and they have worn you out,  
how can you compete with horses?  
If you stumble in safe country,  
how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?  
(Jeremiah 12:5)

I love that verse, where I hear God saying to his exhausted prophet, "You're faster than this . . . You are far faster than you can imagine." It is a huge paradigm shift, calculating our endurance based on resources

beyond ourselves, demonstrating our neediness but also our potential. It is vulnerable, even humbling, but also replete with vision.

And this is where we peacemakers must learn to thrive. It is where our hearts are transformed. As we learn to drink deeply from this river we are changed, and so is the world around us. In Jeremiah 31:2 God says that we will find “favor in the wilderness.” The wilderness becomes the place of blessing, of intimacy, and of deepest belonging.

There is a term that has been passed down from Celtic Christianity called a thin place. It is where the distance between heaven and earth becomes paper thin, almost indistinguishable. Sometimes it even intersects. It is the place of the burning bush, the quiet whisper, of visions and dreams. Too easily we can pass by these places and never recognize them. The still, small voice goes unheard. The sacred ground passes quickly beneath our feet. Like Jacob said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” But when we do hear the voice, everything changes. Sometimes these thin places are incredibly beautiful, but often they are not. The desert, at first glance, is barren, rocky, and lifeless. And yet God’s presence completely transforms it.

This is the power of hearing the voice of God. To hear it is to begin to understand the love of God. This love is the love of a good father who sees far deeper into us than we can. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Everything else feels like a cheap substitute in comparison. We can do our best to medicate our longings, or we can listen. We can search for intimate connections with others, but we will never be known to the extent that God can and does know us. To know it, we must quiet our hearts and wait for his voice. We must let God’s words do their work of transformation, bringing out our true selves and speaking into us our true calling.

I am learning to embrace this calling as peacemaker. Part of me cringes even as I write that. The idea of sinking my roots here in the

rocky creek—to be alone, and yet not alone—is intimidating. The invitation comes to sink my roots deep, to let God quench this insatiable thirst for intimacy and connection, to search for him with my whole heart.

This book is about my journey thus far. As I find myself entering the middle stage of my life, I am learning to savor the work that God uniquely does in this liminal space.

It is constantly changing and growing. Each time, a bit of me dies. That place of self-sufficiency. My ego. It withers and in its place, God offers the space for humility to take root. But simultaneously, God also offers glory. He speaks into my life a vision that extends beyond my hopes and dreams.

These two trajectories, I'm realizing, are constantly at work. Having the eyes to see and ears to hear requires intentionality and discernment. But, in the end, the results are life changing. As Paul promises in 1 Corinthians 2:9,

However, as it is written:

“What no eye has seen,  
what no ear has heard,  
and what no human mind has conceived”—  
the things God has prepared for those who love him—

#### FOR REFLECTION AND CONVERSATION

1. How do you recognize the voice of God in your life?
2. Where does your heart resist God's voice? Where does it leap?
3. Is there a thin place in your life where God's voice is most clear?  
What does that place tell you about how God sees your heart?
4. Where has your heart been planted? What will it take for you to thrive in the place where God has placed you?

BUY THE BOOK!

[ivpress.com/the-winding-path-of-transformation](http://ivpress.com/the-winding-path-of-transformation)