

EMBRACE THE  
**TENSION**

CHOOSING THE RADICAL MIDDLE  
INSTEAD OF PICKING A SIDE

**TOMMY NIXON**



InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Embrace the Tension* by Thomas Joel Nixon.

Copyright © 2026 by Thomas Joel Nixon.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com)

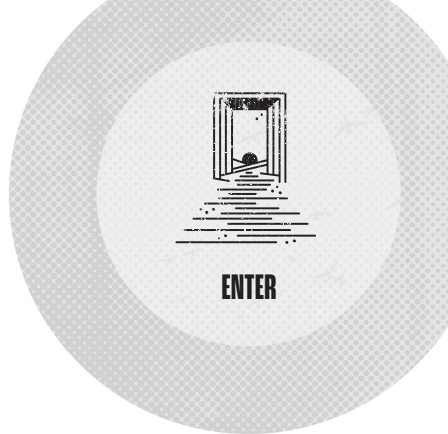


# CONTENTS

Introduction: The Beginning of the Adventure	1
1 Enter the Radical Middle	9
2 This Is the Way	18
3 The Plains of Truth	34
4 The Depths of Nuance	49
5 The Caverns of Identity	65
6 The Switchbacks of Hypocrisy	79
7 The Heights of Purpose	92
8 The Valley of Compassion	108
9 The Mountaintops of Presence	120
10 Walking the Path Together	136
Acknowledgments	151
Notes	153

# 1

## ENTER THE RADICAL MIDDLE



### Entering the Tension

At six o'clock in the evening, just south of the old city of Jerusalem, a young man named Abdul walked onto a bus carrying a package. The plan was to stick this package under a seat and get off the bus. Instead, the package exploded prematurely, killing the young man, injuring twenty-one other people, and destroying the bus.<sup>1</sup> This all happened while I sat on a plane landing in Israel for the first time.

A week later, I was sitting in a youth center in a refugee camp called Aida near Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. It has been a refugee camp since 1950 and sits across from a massive, graffiti-covered security wall that divides the West Bank from the rest of Israel.

As I walked into the youth center, I saw tear gas canisters all over the floor and bullet holes in the walls and windows. It felt very familiar and foreign at the same time. For the last twenty years, I have worked with urban youth and run community centers that are very similar to this one. I am not a stranger to the marks of violence in places like these. As I entered the youth center, I noticed posters hung everywhere showing a picture of a young man.

Sitting and eating lunch, I asked our hosts about the posters. Their response puzzled me: “He is a martyr,” they said, sharing his



story with us. A month earlier, this young man was walking with his cousin when his cousin was shot and killed by an Israeli Defense Force sniper. Soon after losing his cousin, he went missing. For three weeks, the youth workers from the community center could not find him, and his family did not know where he had gone.

The mystery was solved when the young man's body was identified as the bomber on the bus that exploded earlier in the week. In witnessing the killing of his cousin, this young man ran away, became radicalized in a matter of weeks, and died for a cause that, according to the youth center staff, he was not at all a part of before his cousin was killed.

This story continued half a century of violence and trauma and seemed to sum up the back and forth that had been going on for generations. Even still, I was confronted immediately by the gravity of this particular situation. The youth center workers shared his story in a way that highlighted the humanity of this young man and elicited compassion from those listening. The tension started to rise as we received this story of pain and loss and then realized that, in the eyes of many, we were sitting in a terrorist cell celebrating a terrorist. As I wrestled with this, several White American women on the trip started to express their compassion for this young man. They expressed understanding and a heartfelt reaction to the tragic events that would cause a nineteen-year-old boy to commit such a horrific act.

I listened to this back and forth while sitting between two African American leaders who both carried the trauma of yet another police shooting of a young Black man in Minneapolis a few months earlier. The murder of Jamar Clark literally happened in the very city where many of these women lived.<sup>2</sup> Jamar was shot in the head by police while being detained on the ground, and in the videos created by bystanders, you can see and hear the horror of what that community witnessed. My thoughts raced. How did these women

feel about the Black Lives Matter movement? Did they have the same compassion for Jamar as they did for Abdul? Why is it so much easier to care for foreign issues rather than confront the ones in our backyard? What elements revealed Abdul's humanity but made Jamar a statistic? What does being a peacemaker without demonizing others based on my bias look like? How can we see the image of God in others while not condoning all their beliefs or actions? How can we hold the tension of all of this and discover truth and action in the midst of it?

I sat in a moment of true cognitive dissonance, and the room seemed to buzz as I processed this discussion. The theological framing made my head hurt, not to mention confronting the actual lives around me. God was up to something, but it wasn't clean and simple. It wasn't black and white. Sitting there, I could not devise an easy plan, a three-point sermon, or a simple solution. Who was right, and who was wrong? The difficulty of managing all the different perspectives at once drew me into a tension that I had not experienced before. I needed answers and wanted things to be clear, but it wasn't that easy.

You may be reading this and telling yourself, "I know the correct answer," but I would caution you. If you adhere to the teachings of Christ, you will be confronted with a truth that calls for a deeper understanding of his Word and how we live it out in the world. The more we engage in the pain, trauma, and complexity of this world, the more we will be drawn into the tension and hope that Christ offers. It has been years since that trip, but I feel like I am sitting back in that youth center every day.

The divisions in our world become more extreme every day. Everything is a political statement. Tribalism reigns, and many of us are forced into a particular camp or choose to be political and religious orphans. But there is another way. Sitting in that youth center helped me continue a journey that I had been on since birth.



I was born into tension and have always found myself stuck between worlds. I am too liberal for my conservative friends and too conservative for my liberal friends. I am a product of the street and the classroom but don't belong in either. I am a Christian who has no denominational home but has received discipleship from many parts of the body of Christ. I grew up in the Black community but went to a rich White megachurch in the middle of my city. My father lives in Mexico, and I have Mexican brothers and sisters. I've lived in immigrant communities and preached at an Asian American church for eight years. I am mixed with European and Filipino ethnicity and can function in a lot of different cultural spaces, and yet, many times, I also feel culturally lost. The spaces I have lived in have forced me to accept the tension, learn how to survive in it, and eventually receive the gift of it.

### The Radical Middle

I believe this context shaped what I call the Radical Middle. The “radical” part is about how radical we can be in following the teachings of Christ, which by and large are received and recognized as good, yet the “good news” doesn't always feel radical from those who profess to follow his teachings. I believe that if we embody Jesus' teachings not only can it change our lives, but our world. The “middle” is *not* a centrist point of view that avoids conflict and doesn't take a stand. Instead, we meet in the middle to discuss the truth and how to live it

I believe that by embracing tension in that middle place of dialogue, you can take a journey to become who you were created to be.

out. I believe that by embracing tension in that middle place of dialogue, you can take a journey to become who you were created to be. Living in the tension allows us to bring light and healing to a divisive world and transcend a partisan view of humanity.

The premise of this book is a difficult one. It is a hard sell to invite people to embrace tension, but the fact is that we are already in it, and it is deforming us from who we were created to be and making our world a worse place. Can we say the world is better than it was ten years ago? Can we look at the church and celebrate its place in the world? Can we look at our relationships and feel good about where they are? Do we feel more hopeful than we used to?

### Going on an Adventure

I am not okay with the status quo. I refuse to accept this is just how it is and I can't do anything about it. The world and our society are not in a good place. Our tendency as humans to overcorrect, overcompensate, or find safety in tribalism continues to bring pain to our lives and this world. The journey I am inviting you to take through this book takes courage. You are courageous; even if you don't believe that about yourself, I do. You can do this.

Think of the Radical Middle as an adventure; you are the hero. Every hero is faced with a dilemma: Do they push forward? Do they do the challenging task? Do they take the journey? Or do they stay in their situation?

We all find ourselves in a dilemma. Life is not what you want it to be. The church let you down, people you loved let you down, you let yourself down. You thought religion, a particular lifestyle, or finding a partner would be the answer, and you are disappointed. Maybe you are overwhelmed by the evil in this world but don't know what to do about it. Perhaps you are distraught by the political climate or the state that the country is in. You have tried other paths, and you hope this one pays off. Every hero has a challenge that invites them to overcome. I am not sure what yours is, but you find yourself with this book in your hand at the start of a great adventure, and for a time, I get to be your guide.



Every journey starts with a step. You are already experiencing tension in your life and world, and I invite you to take that next step to embrace that tension. The Radical Middle's first step is choosing to go on the adventure.

## **Finding My Way by Getting Lost**

In 2022 I decided to go on the Camino de Santiago. It is a spiritual pilgrimage in Spain. I walked over one hundred miles with a group of men who were all leaders in their respective areas to Santiago de Compostela. This pilgrimage started in the ninth century when it was said that Saint James's remains were found. Saint James was the brother of Jesus and one of the apostles. Soon after, a city and cathedral were built to commemorate and celebrate the discovery of James's tomb. After the fall of Jerusalem to Saladin in 1187, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem became much more complicated, and the Camino de Santiago gained popularity. Pilgrims have been traveling to Santiago for over twelve hundred years.

People of many faiths practice pilgrimage, and most do so to find meaning and purpose at different stages of their lives. I have met people who were having a midlife crisis, just lost someone, just went through a divorce, just experienced the kids moving out, or needed a refresh for their marriage, and some just thought it sounded like a great challenge and they have always wanted to visit Spain and Portugal.

I was no different. In 2022, I was at the end of many transitions and seasons. From 2017 to 2022, we had two major leadership transitions, had a surprise fifth child, and moved three times, all while managing and leading through a pandemic.

As we settled into our new home with the third move, I packed my backpack and headed to Portugal to meet up with my best friend Steve and our friend Jon, who had gone through similar



transitions. Jon created a nonprofit called Homeward Bound for leaders like me in this season.

I felt untethered. My identity, my belonging, and my purpose seemed confusing. Honestly, I hoped the Camino would be a magic bullet. What's the one thing I can do to make everything else make sense and work? I hoped it was the solution I needed to "get me back on track." I was excited about the Camino and even added a unique element before we started walking. This was going to be epic and change everything going forward.

### **Wanting a One-Hundred-Foot Wave**

An underwater trench off the coast of Portugal has transformed a little fishing village into the world's premier big wave surfing spot. In 2010, a big wave surfer from Hawaii named Garrett McNamara first surfed some of the biggest waves in the world at Nazaré in Portugal. Before Garrett, no one had even considered Portugal a big wave surfing spot.

I have always loved the ocean and waves. Water has always been a profoundly spiritual element for me. I had heard about Nazaré for years, and I looked up where we had to be to start our Camino in Portugal, and Nazaré was only two hours south of where we were going to land. I invited Steve and Jon to join me a few days early to experience the magnitude of massive waves at Nazaré. We were all excited.

We arrived at night and immediately went out to the famous lighthouse on the cliff overlooking the ocean, where hundred-foot waves would rise out of the sea and crash onto the rocks below. We arrived in mid to late October, which is the beginning of the big wave season, so there was a chance the waves wouldn't be as big as usual. Even twenty-five-foot waves would be incredible to witness. The following day, we woke up, got ready, and walked a couple of

blocks to the beach. With anticipation and prayers, we came to the water's edge. What we experienced blew my mind.

The level of disappointment is hard to capture in words. There were no twenty-five-foot waves. There were no ten-foot waves. When I tell you that there were no one-foot waves, I am not lying. We sat on the edge of Praia do Norte in Nazaré, Portugal, at what looked like a calm lake. As I was writing this, I checked how big the waves were in Nazaré, and they were twenty-one-feet tall. Yet that day I was staring at flat water.

It felt like the culmination of all my disappointment over the previous years. My disappointment in our systems, our government, the church, society, the generations before me, the generations after, friends, neighbors, and the people I grew up with who took a hard right or left in their beliefs in a way that alienated others or didn't reflect who I knew them to be. I looked out into a sea of disappointment.

My best friend Steve asked me to baptize him at that same beach as a symbol of renewal for him for the next season. I should have taken the disappointment of the waves as a sign. Steve and I had this beautiful moment of connection in the Atlantic Ocean turned lake. What was supposed to be the start of an incredible year was one of the most difficult for him.

This is how we started the Camino—the answer that was supposed to fix all the internal turmoil and set me up for an upward trajectory to success and peace in my life. I wanted that hundred-foot wave, a magic bullet, a mountaintop experience, a baptism without the death that it represents, and an adventure without embracing the tension it offers daily.

My disappointment and Steve's baptism and terrible year (sorry, Steve!) taught me that magic bullets don't work. It was a reminder that anything worth doing in life takes work and courage, and rather than seek ways to numb the tension, it was better to take



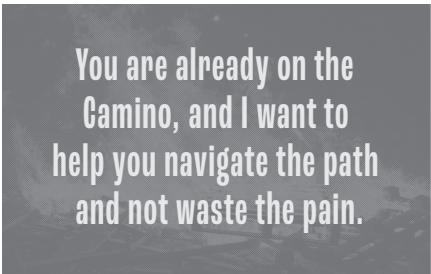
each step to embrace it and allow the disappointments to turn into opportunities to become who I was created to be and make this world better.

Each step I took on the Camino mirrored the journey I was already on in life. Without the distractions of my life and with the simplicity of putting one foot in front of the other while walking to the daily destination, I could isolate the tensions I felt. I could think through them, embrace them, and receive the gift of perspective as I confronted the reality of my life and world.

Instead of experiencing a hundred-foot wave that is formed and crashes in minutes, I took a hundred-mile walk that took time, effort, presence, and intentionality. Here is the secret: You are already on the Camino, and I want to help you navigate the path and not waste the pain.

The Camino was full of joy, pain, surprises, getting lost, being found, and hills and valleys—like life. Just like life, there are many paths to take. The path of the Radical Middle is one of those paths and one that I still travel on. It is a holistic way to engage the tension we already live in while better forming ourselves and not succumbing to bitterness and feeling lost.

We are already in tension, so let's be intentional about it and not waste the pain. The first step on this adventure starts with your willingness to take it. Our next stop is to choose which path we will take, and in the next chapter we will deal with the problem of Jesus.



You are already on the  
Camino, and I want to  
help you navigate the path  
and not waste the pain.

**BUY THE BOOK!**

[ivpress.com/embrace-the-tension](http://ivpress.com/embrace-the-tension)



InterVarsity Press

*Copyrighted content.*