

The background of the book cover is a collage of botanical illustrations. It includes various types of leaves, ferns, and seed pods, some with small letters like 'a', 'b', 'c' and numbers like '26', '27', '45', '46', '47' next to them. A prominent feature is a large, wavy blue line that flows across the cover, partially overlapping a large orange shape. The orange shape is a stylized, rounded form that frames the title and subtitle.

Weathering Change

SEEKING
PEACE AMID
LIFE'S
TOUGH
TRANSITIONS

COURTNEY
ELLIS



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Tough Transitions

*It's sometimes hard to tell whether you are being killed
or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down.*

BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR

NEAR THE SOUTHERN PEAKS of the Sierra Mountains lies a cave that traverses miles underground, worn through metamorphosed limestone. Lined with stalagmites, its ceilings are home to eastern pipistrelle and northern myotis bats. Deep inside, dazzling and macabre creatures exist fully in darkness—translucent centipedes, pseudoscorpions, spiders without eyes.

We drove hours to witness this phenomenon, up the winding highway into Sequoia National Park, and over a narrow, pothole-studded road. Crystal Cave is only open to visitors on official park tours, so we'd booked a noon departure time. Three dozen others stood with us, listening to the ranger's warnings—rockslides, rattlers, poison oak.

When she gave the okay, our kids shot down the trail as if released from a slingshot. My husband, Daryl, bearded and flannelled, followed. I struggled to keep up for a quarter mile, limping but determined, until we rounded a switchback and I could see an even steeper descent ahead.

"Go on," I waved to Daryl and the kids. They hesitated. "I'm not going to make it," I said. "I'll catch you on the way back."

A week before our vacation I'd dropped a metal water bottle on my bare toes. The doctor confirmed that nothing was broken, just a severe contusion, my foot all blues and purples.



“It’ll be very painful for weeks,” he said. “Only do what you can tolerate.”

“Hiking?” I asked, hopeful. He grimaced, handing me a walking cast.

We’d planned our entire vacation around exploring California’s sequoia forests and coastal redwood trails. We’d waited all year. But here I was, a quarter of a mile in, my toes pulsing with pain.

I would see none of the wonder we’d sought. Instead, I would wait for the group to return while I parked myself on a rock and elevated my foot next to a very ironic park sign: *Weathering*, it read. *Though this outcropping of marble may seem as durable as Sierra granite, it is slowly wearing away.*

“Same,” I sighed.

Change is *hard*, whether it’s unexpected change, unwanted change, or even positive change. It rocks my world, and I am a person who vastly prefers a rock-less one. I know I’m not alone in this. I’m willing to bet that you can point to particular changes in your own life that haven’t felt enjoyable or welcome: an illness or injury, the end of a relationship, a job transition, or even simply aging—that cruel reality that comes for us all. Change is hard. Yet it is also constant.

As a pastor, I spend a good deal of time walking with people through changes in their lives. They come to speak with me after learning that the cancer has returned. They’re struggling because the nest is empty, the teenager is wandering from the faith, or the house needs to be downsized. They want to know what to do because they’ve sensed that their spouse shouldn’t be driving anymore or their aging mother might need to move in. How might they cope in the face of these transitions?

Even joyful changes tend to come with a side of grief—a wedding, a new job, a new baby, each can upend nearly everything for a season, leaving us breathless. People sit in my office and pound the table or pull Kleenex after Kleenex from a box. I visit them in their homes or hospital rooms where they do the same. Nothing rattles us quite like change.

So what are we to do? How might we make sense of all the changes we face, both as individuals and as larger groups—congregations,



neighborhoods, communities? Is there a way to find hope in a God who promises never to change, even when all around us is shifting sand? This book is a study in what it might look like to weather change well, to find peace, even amid life's tough transitions. It is an effort to make sense of the ambiguity surrounding change that dwells within our own souls. As Margaret Renkl writes in *The Comfort of Crows*:

I am not ready to move past the past, but I am ready for something different, too, something new and urgent and thrumming with the blood and sap of life. I am learning that it is possible to want two contrary things at once. I want nothing to change. I want everything to change.

Therein lies the rub.

In his book *Master of Change*, author Brad Stulberg encourages those faced with change—which is to say, everyone—to accept its inevitability as a part of life. When we can learn to embrace change, adjusting to it becomes far easier. “If we can let go of our stubbornness and defiance, then change actually promotes health, longevity, and growth,” he writes. This is a tall task, yet it is also one that God invites. The Christian journey is one of transformation and sanctification, after all. As we follow Jesus we become more like him and also grow up more fully into the people God created us to be.

This open-handed adventure can be filled with grace and peace. According to Henri Nouwen, “The compassion Jesus offers challenges us to give up our fearful clinging and to enter with him into God’s fearless life.” Much of our struggle surrounding change lies in our inability to accept that it is an inescapable—and often even *good*—part of existence. I get it; it’s tempting to resist. But change is unavoidable. We can fight the tide all we want, yet our intransigence won’t stop it from rolling in.

Time for some good news: God does not leave us rudderless in how we might navigate the winds that rise and blow. We have the guide of the Spirit, of course, and the unique, authoritative, essential witness of



Scripture. Both are invaluable for our walk through this life. But there is a third mentor given to us as well. One that has much to teach. It is God's good creation, the Book of Nature: seminal, beautiful, brutal. God infuses the natural world with guidance in how we might weather change well. And creation isn't simply an illustration as to how we might understand the transitions we face—it holds deep wisdom for our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world. Jesus often points to birds and fields and trees, not as a cheap way to make a point, but because the created order itself testifies to who God is and how we have been created to live.

Nature demonstrates how to prepare for impending change. When transitions arrive, both flora and fauna show curiosity, adaptability, and resilience. When faced with disorder, animals innovate. Plants flex. Insects find a way. And they do this without the anxiety that so often plagues us, their human cousins. When a tiny sea turtle breaks through the shell of its egg on a remote beach, it wastes no worry before slowly shuffling toward the dark and mighty ocean. Nature simply *is*. "The animals are more ancient than us," writes John O'Donohue. "Somehow they already inhabit the eternal."

My favorite teachers of all the natural world are the birds. They speak, not only in songs and calls but in their behaviors, patterns, and presence. They point us heavenward but also toward the rest of creation, its trees and bees, its fish and reptiles and mammals, its mountains and rivers and vast, sandy deserts. Together they paint a picture of a universe studded with God's intention and attention, its wisdom deeper than our bones.

This book will go beyond just birds though. (My last book, *Looking Up*, was all birds all the time, except for the parts that were about death. Though a few sections were somehow about birds *and* death? It's complicated.) It is not that I've grown tired of them—I am convinced that I will never tire of the birds. It is that paying attention to the birds has begun to teach me also about other facets of creation—seasons, for example, and trees. It became impossible to love a Western Flycatcher



without also becoming curious about what it ate—not just flies, but mosquitoes and midges and moths too. But what kind of moths? That drew me down the rabbit hole of entomology, which led to lizards, which led to amphibians, which . . . well, you get the idea.

Isn't it just like God to leave the natural world so studded with delights that we discover more with every tree we climb? And not just one or two—a meager abundance—but exponentially more? Our God is not stingy. There are about 11,000 species of birds in the world and 30,000 types of fish. These numbers are estimates because *we keep finding more*. I want to walk through this life with my eyes attuned, don't you? No sunsets are saved for later. Every pilgrim walks a path marked by beauty, adorned with hope.

In this book, I will bear witness to some of the ways plants and animals make their homes in the in-between times and places, on the edges and margins, amidst the many transitions they face. It's a book written out of my own need: I want to learn how to weave a nest for my tender young amid the perilous spikes of a succulent like a Cactus Wren or discover how to turn a blackened forest into a foraging ground like a Canada Lynx. I need to believe that if Blue Whales can grow bigger than school buses by eating only tiny krill, then I can look for the flashing silver of nourishment just below the storm-tossed surface of things too.

I don't wonder whether creation has lessons for us in our struggles with change—I *know* that it does. The Book of Nature boasts a deep well of wisdom indeed, if only we might be faithful to study it. Waking up to creation is a life-long journey and joy. I love how ornithologist and poet J. Drew Lanham puts it: "Nature asks only that we notice."

Here I'm seeking deeper and fuller answers to two questions I suspect are nearly universal. The first is this: Why is change so damn hard? The second is its deeper companion: How might we find peace amid life's tough transitions? I suspect that the answers to both will not come in prepackaged words. The lessons written throughout the Book of Nature don't show up as simple formulas: *Do X and weathering change will be easier*. Creation tends to favor more subtle instruction. Its wisdom



shows up in experience and mist and metaphor, the sprawling parables of Jesus to a waiting crowd who just wanted to be told what to do.

“Do you still believe in God?” a student asked my birding friend Paul, a former Baptist pastor who now teaches physics and astronomy.

“Let me show you my duck photos,” answered Paul.

For years I have read and observed and studied in an effort to shape a theology of change. As I did, I noticed four distinct qualities of how creation weathers it: *preparation*, *curiosity*, *adaptability*, and *resilience*. The rest of this book is arranged according to these categories. We will delve deeply into what the natural world models for us in each one and the ways we can begin to understand the echoes of ourselves that are written into each element of creation. In doing so, we may begin to find ourselves home at last in a world that is constantly shifting under our feet, even as it continues to move beneath us.

It won't be easy—change never is. Learning to weather change will inevitably change us as well. But if God can send Abraham out to look at the stars and minister to Elijah with ravens and answer Job out of a raging whirlwind, I have no doubt the Spirit is speaking to each of us through the natural world too. Let us tune our eyes and ears and hearts to the voice.

Above all, this book is a twofold invitation. First, it is my version of the women at the tomb saying, “Come and see.” Together we will investigate how the natural world responds to and copes with change. But to do so, we must first and regularly engage in the spiritual practice of noticing. Of becoming aware of the world God is building around us with all its wild magic. Of tuning into bizarre realities like miracles and holiness and resurrection, wingbeats and fungi and breezes and soil.

Second, the invitation is this: The next time you are facing change and feeling unmoored, distraught, confused, frustrated, terrified, or just plain out-of-sorts, go outside, take a deep breath, and look around. Then, tell of your own wonders.



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