

learning to swim

I learned about waves when I was little, swimming in Lake Michigan in navy blue water under a clear sky, and the most important thing I learned was this: if you try to stand and face the wave, it will smash you to bits, but if you trust the water and let it carry you, there's nothing sweeter. And a -couple decades later, that's what I'm learning to be true about life, too. If you dig in and fight the change you're facing, it will indeed smash you to bits. It will hold you under, drag you across the rough sand, scare and confuse you.

This last season in my life has been characterized, more than anything else, by change. Hard, swirling, one-after-another changes, so many that I can't quite regain my footing before the next one comes, very much like being tumbled by waves. It began three years ago, in January in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I got pregnant, lost a job I loved, had a baby, wrote a book. A year after I lost my job, my husband, Aaron, left his job in a really painful way, and then for the next year and a half we traveled together and separately almost every week, doing all the freelance work we could find, looking for a new home and trying to pay the bills. Leaving our jobs at the church meant leaving the church community, the heart of our world in Grand Rapids, and that loss left a hole in our lives that was as tender and palpable as a bruise.

The day after our son Henry's first birthday, my

brother Todd left on a two-year sailing trip around the world, taking my husband's best friend Joe with him. My best friend, Annette, left Grand Rapids and moved back to California. I got pregnant again, our kitchen and basement flooded, and on the Fourth of July I lost the baby. My first thought, there in the doctor's office, was, *Everything in my life is dying. I can't keep anything alive.*

At some point in all that, we put our house up for sale, which meant lots and lots of showings but no offers. After several months, my husband and our son and I left our house still for sale and moved home to Chicago, to a little house on the same street I lived on as a child, exhausted and battered, out of breath and shaken up.

It may appear to an outside observer that these have been the best years of our lives. We became parents to a healthy child; we met interesting people and heard their stories and were welcomed into their homes and churches. I wrote a book, and Aaron recorded an album, and we got to be, really and truly, working artists. Every time I read over that list, I know that it should have been wonderful. But *should have been* is worth absolutely nothing. For most of that season, I was clenching my teeth, waiting for impact, longing for it to be over.

I know that to another person my difficult season would have been a walk in the park, and that all over the world, people suffer in unimaginable ways and manage far worse than my own little list.

I was miserable because I lost touch with the heart of the story, the part where life always comes from death. I love the life part, and I always try to skip over that pesky death part. You can't do that, as much as I've tried.

I believe that God is making all things new. I believe

that Christ overcame death and that pattern is apparent all through life and history: life from death, water from a stone, redemption from failure, connection from alienation. I believe that suffering is part of the narrative, and that nothing really good gets built when everything's easy. I believe that loss and emptiness and confusion often give way to new fullness and wisdom.

But for a long season, I forgot all those things. I didn't stop believing in God. It wasn't a crisis of faith. I prayed and served and pursued a life of faith the way I had before that season and the way I still do now. But I realized all at once, sitting in church on a cold dark night, that the story I was telling was the wrong one—or at the very least, an incomplete one. I had been telling the story about how hard it was. That's not the whole story. The rest of the story is that I failed to live with hope and courage and lived instead a long season of whining, self-indulgence, and fear. This is my confession.

I'm able to see now that what made that season feel so terrible to me were not the changes. What made that season feel so terrible is that I lost track of some of the crucial beliefs and practices that every Christian must carry with them. Possibly a greater tragedy is that I didn't even know it until much later.

Looking back now I can see that it was more than anything a failure to believe in the story of who God is and what he is doing in this world. Instead of living that story—one of sacrifice and purpose and character—I began to live a much smaller story, and that story was only about me. I wanted an answer, a timeline, and a map. I didn't want to have to trust God or anything I couldn't see. I didn't want to wait or follow. I wanted my old life back,

and even while I read the mystics and the prophets, even while I prayed fervently, even while I sat in church and begged for God to direct my life, those things didn't have a chance to transform me, because under those actions and intentions was a rocky layer of faithlessness, fear, and selfishness.

I believe that faith is less like following a GPS through a precise grid of city blocks, and more like being out at sea: a tricky journey, nonlinear and winding, the wind kicking up and then stalling. But what I really wanted in the middle of it all was some dry land and a computer-woman's soothing voice leading me through the mess.

If I'm honest, I prayed the way you order breakfast from a short-order cook: this is what I want. Period. This is what I want. Aren't you getting this? I didn't pray for God's will to be done in my life, or, at any rate, I didn't mean it. I prayed to be rescued, not redeemed. I prayed for it to get easier, not that I would be shaped in significant ways. I prayed for the waiting to be over, instead of trying to learn something about patience or anything else for that matter.

I couldn't make peace with uncertainty—but there's nothing in the biblical narrative that tells us certainty is part of the deal. I couldn't unclench my hands and my jaw, and I locked my knees and steeled myself in the face of almost every wave. I cried in the shower and alone in my car. When I looked into my own eyes in the mirror, they seemed flat and lifeless, and things that should have been wonderful left me blank and despairing. Sometimes at parties during that season, I felt my cheeks trying to smile, but I knew that my eyes weren't playing along. The tension and anxiety flattened me, and the fear about our future threatened to vacuum up the energy and buoyancy from

almost every day, even as I fought to celebrate the good moments. Looking back, it seems like I mostly lost that fight, or possibly, generously, it was a draw.

Every wave presents us with a choice to make, and quite often, unfortunately, I have stood, both resolute and terrified, staring down a wave. I have been smacked straight on with the force of the water, tumbled, disoriented, gasping for breath and for my swimsuit bottoms, and spit onto shore, embarrassed and sand-burned, standing up only to get knocked down again, refusing to float on the surface and surrender to the sea.

There were also a few glittering, very rare moments of peace and sweetness, when I felt the goodness and familiarity of -people who loved me, when God's voice sounded tender and fatherly to my ears, when I was able to release my breath and my fists for just a moment and float. And as I mine back through my heart and memories, I notice something interesting: the best moments of the last few years were the very rare moments when I've allowed these changes to work their way through my life, when I've lived up to my faith, when I've been able even for a minute to see life as more than my very own plan unfolding on my schedule, when I've practiced acceptance, when I've floated instead of fought, when I've rested, even for a moment, on the surface instead of wrestling the water itself. And those moments are like heaven.

So that's where my mind and heart are these days: more moments of heaven, and less locking of the knees. More awareness of God's presence and action and ability, and less stranglehold on my fear and anxiety. More floating, and less getting tumbled.

And while I certainly didn't thrive on the process,

I'm really thankful for the result. I'm thankful for what change forced me to face within myself. I found myself confronted by the whiny, entitled child I had become. I like what got stripped away—like my expectations—and what was revealed. I appreciate the things that became grounded more deeply in my spirit and in my marriage. I respect the things that change forged in my life, even though it was very painful.

More than anything, I know now that I never want to live that way again—I don't like the person I became, and I'm not proud of the contagious fear and ugliness I left in my wake everywhere I went. Again, this is my confession, and my promise: I want to live a new way, the way I've always believed, but temporarily lost sight of.

I know now that I can make it through more than I thought, with less than I thought. I know better than to believe that the changes are over, and I know better than to believe the next ones will be easier, but I've learned the hard way that change is one of God's greatest gifts and one of his most useful tools. I've learned the hard way that change can push us, pull us, rebuke and remake us. It can show us who we've become, in the worst ways, and also in the best ways. I've learned that it's not something to run away from, as though we could, and I've learned that in many cases, change is not a function of life's cruelty but instead a function of God's graciousness.

The world is changing all the time, at every moment. Someone is falling in love right now, and someone is being born. A dream is coming true in some city or small town, and right at the same moment, another dream is crashing and crumbling. A marriage is ending somewhere, and it's somebody's wedding day, maybe even

right in the same town. It's all happening.

If you dig in and fight the changes, they will smash you to bits. They'll hold you under, drag you across the rough sand, scare and confuse you. But if you can find it within yourself, in the wildest of seasons, just for a moment, to trust in the goodness of God, who made it all and holds it all together, you'll find yourself drawn along to a whole new place, and there's truly nothing sweeter. Unclench your fists, unlock your knees and also the door to your heart, take a deep breath, and begin to swim. Begin to let the waves do their work in you.

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