THE IVP SIGNATURE COLLECTION

STRONG AND WEAK

Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing

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Beyond the False Choice

Two questions haunt every human life and every human community. The first: *What are we meant to be?* The second: *Why are we so far from what we're meant to be?*

Human beings have an indelible sense that our life has a purpose—and a dogged sense that we have not fulfilled our purpose. Something has gone wrong on the way to becoming what we were meant to be, individually and together.

The first question exposes the gap in our own self-understanding, our half-formed sense that we are meant to be more than we know. How can we have such a deep sense of purpose but find ourselves unable to easily name or grasp that purpose? Yet this is the human condition.

The second question exposes the gap between our aspirations and our accomplishments, between our hopes and our reality, between our reach and our grasp. If the first question gives voice to our greatest hopes, the second brings to the

surface our deepest regrets. Having both great hopes and great regrets is also, alas, the human condition.

In this book I offer a way of answering both of these questions. It's simple enough to explain in a minute or two of conversation, or in a page or two of a book—it's coming up in just a few pages, and you'll grasp its essence almost immediately. You'll see it in action in your friendships, your workplace, your family and your favorite TV show or movie—you'll find it in the pages of Scripture and in the most mundane moments of day-to-day life. You'll see it in the most horrifying contexts of injustice and exploitation, and in the most inspiring moments of compassion and reconciliation.

Many simple ideas are *simplistic*—they filter out too much of reality to be truly useful. This one is not, because it is a particular kind of simple idea, the kind we call a *paradox.* It holds together two simple truths in a simple relationship, but it generates fruitful tension, complexity and possibility. I've come to call it the *paradox of flourishing.*

"Flourishing" is a way of answering the first great question, *What are we meant to be?* We are meant to flourish—not just to survive, but to thrive; not just to exist, but to explore and expand. "*Gloria Dei vivens homo,*" Irenaeus wrote. A loose—but by no means inaccurate—translation of those words has become popular: "The glory of God is a human being fully

alive." To flourish is to be fully alive, and when we read or hear those words something in us wakes up, sits up a bit straighter, leans ever so slightly forward. To be fully alive would connect us not just to our own proper human purpose but to the very heights and depths of divine glory. To live fully, in these transitory lives on this fragile earth, in such a way that we somehow participate in the glory of God—that would be flourishing. And that is what we are meant to do.

Every paradox requires that we embrace two things that seem like opposites. The paradox of flourishing is that true flourishing requires two things that at first do not seem to go together at all. But in fact, if you do not have both, you do not have flourishing, and you do not create it for others.

Here's the paradox: flourishing comes from being both strong and weak.

Flourishing requires us to embrace both authority and vulnerability, both capacity and frailty—even, at least in this broken world, both life and death.

Flourishing comes from being both strong and weak.

The answer to the second great question—*Why are we so far from what we're meant to be?*—is that we have forgotten this basic paradox of flourishing, which is the secret of being fully alive. Actually, we haven't just forgotten it, as if we had misplaced it absentmindedly. We've suppressed

it. We've hidden it. We've fled from it. Because we fear it.

I used to think that what we feared was vulnerability—the "weak" part of the paradox. But in the course of writing this book and talking with many others about the paradox of flourishing, I've realized that we fear authority too. The truth is that we are afraid of both sides of the paradox of flourishing—and we especially fear to combine them in the only way that really leads to real life, for ourselves and others.

This book is about how to embrace the life for which we were made—life that embraces the paradox of flourishing, that pursues greater authority and greater vulnerability *at the same time.*

But most of all, this book is about a picture, the simplest and best way I know to explore the paradox of flourishing. It's really just a sketch, the kind of thing you can draw on a napkin, but it will give us plenty to think about for the rest of this book (see figure 1.1).

It's one of my favorite things: a 2x2 chart.

The Power of the 2x2

There's nothing I find quite as satisfying as a 2x2 chart at the right time. The 2x2 helps us grasp the nature of paradox. When used properly, the 2x2 can take two ideas we thought were opposed to one another and show how they complement one another.

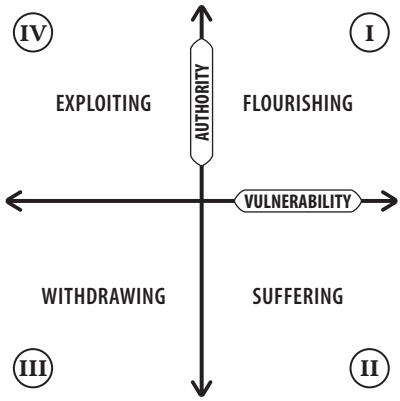

Figure 1.1

The world is littered with false choices. The leadership writers Jim Collins and Scott Porras talk about "the tyranny of the OR and the genius of the AND." Should products be low cost *or* high quality? Whom do managers serve, their investors *or* their employees? The most transformative companies manage both. Are we the products of our nature *or* our nurture? They are not opposites—they have to go together.

The Christian world has its own versions: Is the mission of the church evangelism and proclamation *or* is it justice and demonstration? Are we supposed to be conservative *or* radical, contemplative *or* active, set apart from the world *or* engaged in the world? Or take the topic that almost generated the first

great biblical 2x2 chart. Is the life of the Christian about faith *or* works? ("Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you a 2x2 chart of my faith and works"—James 2:18, my take on the original Greek!) Then you'll be ready for the ultimate question: Was Jesus of Nazareth human *or* divine? Was he Son of Man *or* Son of God?

In all these cases, what we need is not a linear "or" but a two-dimensional "and" that presses us to see the surprising connections between two things we thought we had to choose between—and perhaps even to discover that having the fullness of one requires that we have the fullness of the other.

One of the best examples comes from studies of effective parenting—the kind of parenting that produces children who display self-confidence and self-control. Which is better, to be a strict, demanding parent who sets firm boundaries, or a responsive, engaging parent who interacts with their children with warmth and compassion? If you were a parent, where on this spectrum would you want to be (see figure 1.2)?

Put the question this way and most parents will lean one

Figure 1.2

way or the other. Some will quote Proverbs—"spare the rod, spoil the child"—and opt for firmness (see Proverbs 13:24). Others will quote Paul—"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger"—and opt for warmth (see Ephesians 6:4, Colossians 3:21).

Both are right.

Firmness and warmth, it turns out, are not actually opposites. They can go together—in fact, they must go together for children to flourish. Their relationship is much better shown with a 2x2 (see figure 1.3).

Map firmness and warmth this way, and you quickly discover that *either* one, without the other, is poor parenting. Firmness without warmth—authoritarian parenting—leads

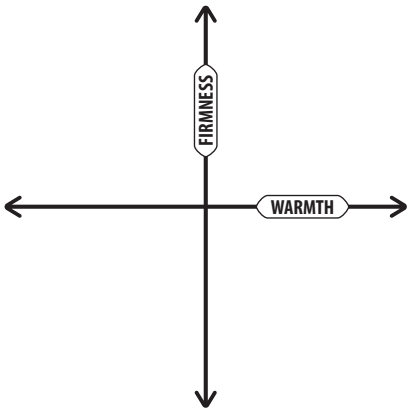

Figure 1.3

eventually to rebellion. Warmth without firmness—indulgent parenting—leads eventually to spoiled, entitled brats.

In fact, there aren't just two ways to be a bad parent—there are three! The worst of all is parenting that is neither warm nor firm—absent parenting (see figure 1.4).

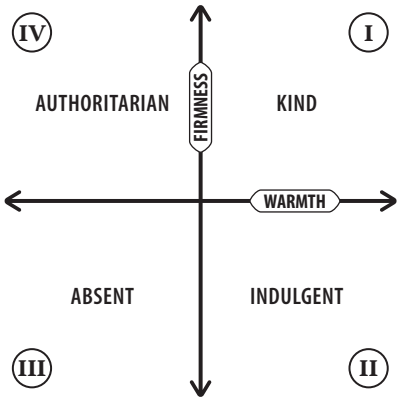

Figure 1.4

There is a difference, it turns out, between being nice and being kind. "Nice" parenting drifts down to the bottom right, settling for easy, warm feelings without ever setting high expectations. Kind parenting manages to be clear and firm while also tender and affectionate. Psychologists call it *authoritative* parenting rather than *authoritarian*. The best parenting, in our 2x2, is up and to the right.

There are a few more insights hidden in this simple diagram.

I've numbered the quadrants using Roman numerals I to IV, starting with the ideal quadrant up and to the right and continuing around clockwise—in the same order and direction we'll consider them for the next four chapters. Consider the line from the top left to the bottom right, from quadrant IV (Authoritarian) to quadrant II (Indulgent), from firmness without warmth to warmth without firmness.

Remember our one-dimensional line with warmth on the left and firmness on the right? In practice, if that is your mental model of parenting, you'll end up becoming either authoritarian (firmness without warmth) or indulgent (warmth without firmness). The IV-II line describes the line of *false choice*—the world we often think we live in (see figure 1.5). It describes our default way of thinking about

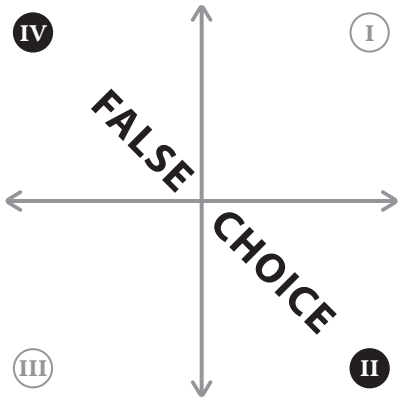

Figure 1.5

how the world works—at least when we are limited to a linear model.

Because neither authoritarian nor indulgent parenting produces healthy results, they tend to generate and reinforce one another. Grow up in an authoritarian home, and you may well react by being an overly indulgent parent. Grow up with indulgence, and you may well overcorrect toward strictness when your own children come along. Much of the dysfunction of our lives comes from oscillating along the line of the false choice, never seeing that there might be another way.

One other observation: There is one quadrant that really is the worst of all. It's quadrant III (Absent), the quadrant of withdrawal and disengagement. Authoritarian parents may not meet their children's need for affection, but at least they provide structure. Indulgent parents may not provide structure, but at least they create an environment of acceptance and affirmation. But absent parents leave two voids in their children's lives, not just one. There's something about the Absent quadrant that is uniquely damaging—the total opposite of the Kind quadrant.

You could sum it up this way: We tend to think that our lives have to be lived along the line of false choice, the IV-II line. But actually the deepest question of our lives is how to move further and further away from quadrant III (Absent) and more and more fully into quadrant I (Kind).

The III-I axis is the one that matters the most—the one that leads from a life that is not worth living to the life that really is life. And that, in a nutshell, is what this book is about.

The Paradox of Jesus

No human being ever embodied flourishing more than Jesus of Nazareth. No human life (let alone death) ever unleashed more flourishing for others. And precisely for this reason, no other life brings the paradox of flourishing so clearly into focus. In the life of Jesus we see two distinct patterns that can seem impossible to reconcile.

On the one hand, consider the bookends of his life on earth. He was born an infant, utterly dependent like every other human being. He ended his life on a Roman cross, was buried and descended to the dead. One of Christianity's oldest texts puts it this way:

> Though he was in the form of God,
> [he] did not regard equality with God
> as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself,
> taking the form of a slave,
> being born in human likeness.
> And being found in human form,
> he humbled himself
> and became obedient to the point of death—
> even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

On the other hand, there were Jesus' three years of flourishing public ministry, the culture-making effects of which resound through history and throughout the world—the most consequential life ever lived. Christians believe that this very Son of Man and Son of God now sits at the right hand of the Father, truly the world's Lord, and sends his Spirit of power to equip us to live his life in the world. To quote the very next line of that same ancient text: "Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:9). Indeed, Jesus himself told his first followers that they would do even greater things than he himself had done (John 14:12).

But how can these two callings—to humility and to boldness, to death and to life, to submission to the worst the world can do and to reigning with Christ over the world—possibly coexist? What do they mean for those of us who have some scope of choice and action—those of us who have been granted privilege and power? What do they mean for those who live at the cruelest edges of the world, in settings of implacable injustice and oppression? Is there really any Christlike way to exercise leadership within our broken

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human institutions all the way up to (or down to) the church itself? What would be the specific practices we could adopt to live in ways that bear the true image and bring lasting flourishing?

We need a way to hold these two seemingly opposing facets of Jesus' life, and our calling, together—a way to navigate this complexity without being overwhelmed. Which means we need a 2x2 chart, of course.

The Dimensions of Power

I'm sure you see it coming already—the two dimensions of Jesus' life, his vulnerability in dependence and death on the one hand, his authority in his earthly ministry and his heavenly exaltation on the other hand, can easily start to seem like linear alternatives. Exaltation or humiliation? Ascension or crucifixion? Miracles of healing, deliverance and even resurrection, or, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The empty tomb or the cross? The only way to hold them together is a 2x2 (see figure 1.6).

Some of us will instinctively identify with, or aspire to, the "vulnerability" dimension. Perhaps that is the reality of our lives—it is, eventually, the reality of every mortal life. It may be the reality of the community or family into which we were born, making us keenly aware of the limits of our power and the precariousness of our circumstances. Or we may aspire to identify with vulnerable people and places.

From those places and with those people, we look at Jesus and see vulnerability. Jesus identified with the vulnerable in his birth, life and death. Whether we identify with vulnerability or aspire to it, Jesus is there.

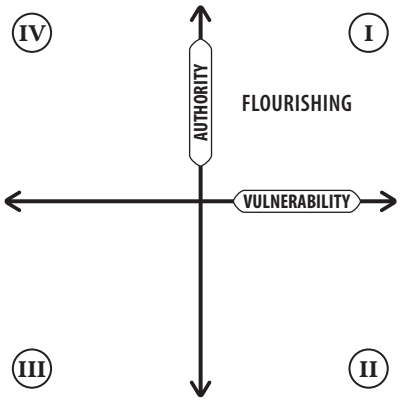

Figure 1.6

On the other hand, others of us identify with, or aspire to, authority. We have been told we can make a difference in the world; we've been given opportunities for creativity and leadership. Other people respond positively when we suggest a course of action. Maybe we've invested substantial amounts of our time and money (maybe our parents' money) in gaining authority in the form of training and certificates and degrees. We look at Jesus and see authority—as early as age twelve in the temple, engaging

powerfully with the scribes; standing up in his hometown synagogue and boldly proclaiming himself as the fulfillment of the prophet's vision; confounding Pilate and the Jewish leaders even when he was in chains; breathing on his disciples after his resurrection and giving them his Spirit, telling them they were now commissioned to go out into the whole world with his authority. Whether we identify with authority or aspire to it, Jesus is there.

When we identify with one dimension or another, it's easy to become impatient with people who emphasize the other one. I worked in a campus ministry on an Ivy League campus where we emphasized the Christian call to "downward mobility," to use one's privilege and power as an opportunity to serve the materially and spiritually poor. One day an African American student confronted me. "When I came to college," he said with some frustration, "my entire community held a prayer service and laid hands on me to commission me to go to Harvard. And now you want me to tell them that I'm just coming back to the hood to work for a nonprofit ministry?" His community had commissioned him for authority—power and position in parts of the culture where they had historically been absent or underrepresented. Who was I to tell him not to stay on that path?

What I was missing, at that point in my life, was a 2x2 conception of authority and vulnerability—the possibility

that the journey of Christian discipleship, and true power, would involve not just a progression toward one or the other, but toward both at the same time. Such a conception would not simply authorize my student to leave his vulnerability behind and pursue privilege and power, but it also did not authorize me to ignore his (and his community's) legitimate pursuit of flourishing and the authority that flourishing requires.

This book is my long overdue answer to that student. First we will examine the four possible combinations of authority and vulnerability on that 2x2 diagram. Properly combined, authority and vulnerability lead to flourishing (chapter 2). But when either one is absent—or even worse, when both are missing—we find distortions of human beings, organizations and institutions. We find *suffering*, *withdrawing* and *exploiting* (chapters 3, 4 and 5)—which in their most virulent forms become poverty, apathy and tyranny. They don't always appear to be that bad—poverty can look like mild disempowerment, apathy can look appealingly like safety, tyranny often seems like mastery. In another layer of complexity, it will turn out that all of us inevitably spend time in each of these three quadrants, and God's grace is real and available in them all. But none of them is the fullness of what we are made for, the life that is really life.

So how do we move up and to the right on this 2x2 chart?

Surprisingly, rather than simply moving pleasantly into ever greater authority and ever greater vulnerability, we have to take two fearsome journeys, both of which seem like detours that lead away from the prime quadrant. The first is the journey to *hidden vulnerability* (chapter 6), the willingness to bear burdens and expose ourselves to risks that no one else can fully see or understand. The second is *descending to the dead* (chapter 7), the choice to visit the most broken corners of the world and our own heart. Only once we have made these two fateful journeys will we be the kind of people who can be entrusted with true power, the power that moves *up and to the right* (chapter 8) and brings others who have been trapped in tyranny, apathy and poverty along with us.

In the book *Mountains Beyond Mountains,* the renowned public health physician Paul Farmer tells his biographer, Tracy Kidder, "People call me a saint and I think, I have to work harder. Because a saint would be a great thing to be."

I think Farmer is entirely right that a saint would be a great thing to be. The saints are, ultimately, the people we recognize as fully alive—the people who flourished and brought flourishing to others, the ones in whom the glory of God was most fully seen. There really is no other goal higher for us than to become people who are so full of authority and vulnerability that we perfectly reflect what

human beings were meant to be and disclose the reality of the Creator in the midst of creation. "Life holds only one tragedy," the French Catholic Léon Bloy wrote, "not to have been a saint."

But becoming a saint is about quite a bit more than "working harder"—or perhaps better put, it's about a great deal less. If you have some inkling, like Farmer, that a saint would be a great thing to be, and if you also have some inkling that you never could work hard enough to actually become one, you're on the path to true flourishing.