

"Ashlee's thoughtful approach to discernment is one I will be recommending for years to come."

EMILY P. FREEMAN

Wall Street Journal bestselling author of *The Next Right Thing*

SAY



GOOD

**SPEAKING ACROSS HOT TOPICS,
COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS,
AND TENSE SITUATIONS**

ASHLEE EILAND

FOREWORD BY SAM ACHO

Author, Speaker, ESPN Analyst

Ashlee is a brilliant writer and a wise leader, and I'm so grateful for this important, beautiful book. Her voice is clear and deep and necessary, and I'm going to be handing this book out left and right.

SHAUNA NIEQUIST, *New York Times* bestselling author

Say Good is a necessary read for anyone yearning to make a difference in their communities and contribute to a more just and compassionate world. Ashlee Eiland's words inspire us to move beyond silence and emerge as agents of change.

Say Good is a powerful and timely book that explores the vital role of our voices in today's world. With deep reflection and personal vulnerability, Eiland confronts the challenging reality of cultural, political, and relational pressures that we face daily.

As a pastor, she beautifully articulates the responsibility we all share as image bearers of God to use our voices to speak truth and advocate for change. Eiland's words echo with authenticity and wisdom, inviting readers to navigate difficult conversations and engage with hot topics fearlessly.

LATASHA MORRISON, author of *New York Times* bestseller *Be the Bridge*

Like many, maybe most, I've found myself exhausted in recent years as polarization continues to fracture our neighborhoods, cities, and churches. Truth matters, but how we embody and express truth matters just as much. In *Say Good*, Ashlee Eiland offers us the gifts of courage, conviction, and possibility. This book is an inspiring and practically helpful invitation to transcend the divides—truly a necessary work for our time.

JAY Y. KIM, pastor and author

Finally, a go-to book that offers wise direction on when it's good to speak up and when it might be best to stay quiet. In a world of hot takes and quick reactions, Ashlee's thoughtful approach to discernment is one I will be recommending for years to come.

EMILY P. FREEMAN, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author of *The Next Right Thing*

One of the most important voices of her generation, Ashlee Eiland offers a radical path of love—one that has the capacity to build up our convictions and tear down our divisions; one that reveals community through vulnerability; one that teaches us how and when to use our voices to create a more just and humane world. *Say Good* is the remedy for what ails us.

RACHEL MACY STAFFORD, *New York Times* bestselling author and certified special education teacher

Ashlee is a voice—a voice of hope, a voice of love, a voice of peace and peace-making. I have watched her navigate the kinds of conversations she describes here . . . and do so with grace and humility. But here's the best part: She wants you to know that *you have a voice too*. For all who want to use their voice for good in this world, Ashlee provides a clear and thoughtful framework that will be useful and fruitful across an array of contexts and situations for years to come.

GLENN PACKIAM, lead pastor of Rockharbor Church, author of *The Resilient Pastor*, and coauthor (with Holly Packiam) of *The Intentional Year*

In this important book, Ashlee invites us to walk in compassion and love while asking ourselves—*What truth do we want to return to?*

KATE BAER, *New York Times* bestselling author

A profoundly healing, helpful, and practical road map to knowing what to say, share, and stand for in times of tension. This is a message for this moment. Never had I read a book this clear and biblical, with so many tangible tools helping readers find their unique voices and live with hopeful conviction and genuine compassion. In the eye-opening pages of *Say Good*, Ashlee Eiland writes with vulnerability, humility, and tender authority, graciously guiding us in building a more beautiful world.

HOSANNA WONG, international speaker, spoken word artist, and bestselling author of *How (Not) to Save the World*

When injustice and tragedy happen in our world, many well-intentioned people stay silent. They want to say something; they just don't know how to navigate all the competing internal dynamics to find the right words. What you hold in your hands is an absolute gift. Ashlee Eiland's words will guide you biblically across the tightrope of cultural issues so you can faithfully discern how to *Say Good*.

STEVE CARTER, pastor and author of *The Thing Beneath the Thing*

At a time when each day brings more division, *Say Good* is our generous guide for togetherness. Christ-centered, discerning, and vulnerable to the core, Eiland masterfully shows us how to steward our lives toward the flourishing of all. Though we swim in complexity, the answer is not to clam up *or* perpetually scream into a bullhorn. There is a better way, built of discernment and proximity. Now we have the tools.

SHANNAN MARTIN, author of *Start with Hello* and *The Ministry of Ordinary Places*

Ashlee Eiland is the rare leader who embodies both profound compassion and expansive strength. In *Say Good*, Ashlee creates a framework to help us honor the complexities of our God-given humanity—in all our fragility, resilience, and belovedness. This book caused me to feel loved and known and simultaneously challenged and invited deeper into growth. I'm grateful for this timely message.

AUNDI KOLBER, MA, LPC, therapist and author of *Try Softer* and *Strong like Water*

Ashlee gives voice to something I've been feeling but unable to articulate, especially not as beautifully as she has. In a cultural moment where it seems almost in vogue to cling to cynicism, Ashlee does a remarkable job of stirring the imagination and painting a vision of the future that is so compelling, so Kingdom rich, it's hard not to want to be a part of it.

Something else that I especially appreciate about Ashlee is that she is a practitioner. While her words are deeply researched, they aren't merely ivory-tower pontifications but the overflow of a boots-on-the-ground pastor who is doing the work.

Read this at your own risk. I suspect that this book will make you, like me, uncomfortable in the best ways and challenge you to step into a more resurrected life than you thought possible.

IAN SIMKINS, pastor at The Bridge Church

Ashlee has given us a needed, nuanced guide for our fractured times. She compassionately leads us toward choosing justice, mercy, and humility in a world that often pits us against each other—or tells us our voice doesn't matter. How do we enter hard conversations with courage and compassion? Ashlee lays out a way forward, inviting us to honor God, ourselves, and our neighbors as we stay awake to the pain of the world.

KAYLA CRAIG, author of *Every Season Sacred* and *To Light Their Way*;
creator of Liturgies for Parents

This book is a helpful guide to remembering, receiving, and retelling the good story of God amid a very hard world. It's a hopeful invitation to participate in a more just and beautiful vision of that Kingdom together.

KATHERINE WOLF, author of *Hope Heals*, *Suffer Strong*, and
Treasures in the Dark

In *Say Good*, Ashlee Eiland reminds us that the words we speak have the power to shape the world we inhabit. As image bearers of God, we have power to *say good* into the chaos and help shape a world where we all can flourish. Eiland's book gives us the invitation and provides us with the practical tools to use the words we have for the good of all.

DREW JACKSON, poet and author of *God Speaks through Wombs* and *Touch the Earth*

In her book *Say Good: Speaking across Hot Topics, Complex Relationships, and Tense Situations*, Ashlee Eiland invites us to embrace authenticity and accountability with solid biblical teachings and heartfelt storytelling. Ashlee poignantly speaks to the tension and division we're living in. If you've found yourself wrestling with the ache of not knowing what to say, this book was written for you. It is timely and shelf worthy!

CASSANDRA SPEER, bestselling author, Bible teacher, and vice president of Her True Worth

Ashlee is truly a repairer and restorer—using the wounds, wins, and lessons of her life to encourage us not to give up but to find our voice and place in bringing hope and change into our communities.

JENA HOLLIDAY, artist, author, and founder of Spoonful of Faith

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**SPEAKING ACROSS HOT TOPICS,
COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS,
AND TENSE SITUATIONS**

ASHLEE EILAND

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Say Good: Speaking across Hot Topics, Complex Relationships, and Tense Situations

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The Team:

David Zimmerman, Publisher; Caitlyn Carlson, Senior Editor; John Greco, Copyeditor; Olivia Eldredge, Operations Manager; Ron C. Kaufmann, Designer

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Foreword

Recently, I've been at a loss for words, and I can't quite figure out why. I've encountered a myriad of issues, both personal and professional, at home and abroad, and I haven't known what to do. I've known what I think and how I feel, but I haven't known if, when, and how to get the words out.

And then I met Ashlee, and something changed. I became free. I saw Ashlee use her voice, and that gave me the courage to use mine. Ashlee is a leader in every sense of the word. She steps into spaces that need to be filled and lights up places that are full of darkness. Ashlee is courageous, and I admire that. She's also a giver, and this book is a good gift. It's a reminder that we each have influence and opportunity. The opportunity to bring hope to hurting people and light to dark places. To be present. To grow. The chance to live, lead, learn, and love. The ability to speak.

Speak. At the end of the day, this is what Ashlee is asking us to do. We all have a voice. Whether we use it is up to us. Have you ever been afraid to share your thoughts? Maybe you were afraid of potential repercussions. Maybe you feared that you didn't have what it took. That you were not enough. We've all been afraid. Even as I write these

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words, pieces of me feel fear. I'm afraid that I've missed my moment. That I'll mess up. That I'm not enough . . . or that I'm too much. So I don't speak. That is, I didn't speak until now. Ashlee's words, teamed with the foundational and actionable steps she outlines here, are just the tools that you and I need to use our voices. To speak.

I needed this book. Better yet, I needed Ashlee. Her voice, her care, her willingness to be used for the Kingdom of God. As I read this book, I was changed. It was as if my fears began fading away. Ashlee's voice has a way of doing that for people. Of healing damaged thought processes and replacing them with food for the soul. Her words are a gentle but urgent reminder that we are more than what we give ourselves credit for. And that every one of our life's experiences has led us to this moment, to letting go of our fears and holding on to the truth. To say good, you must be willing to feel the fear of the moment and replace it with something deeper. A faith that better days are ahead and that we are on this earth to help usher in these better days.

With grace . . . and peace.

Sam Acho
Author, speaker, ESPN analyst

INTRODUCTION

OUR GREAT BALANCING ACT

*Not everything that is faced can be changed;
but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

JAMES BALDWIN,
“As Much Truth As One Can Bear,” *New York Times*

“We have to say something,” I whisper to my husband.

Sunlight streams through the large bay window in the front of our house. I’m sitting on the carpet, tears smearing my cheeks, messy strokes of weariness and anger.

We’re new here. We just moved to this state eight months ago to take on new leadership roles. We haven’t been here long enough to claim that we’re trusted. Add in the onset of a pandemic, and not only are we not well-known—we’re distanced.

But on this Wednesday in May, the thumping in my chest is drowning out our newness. My heart pounds in the cacophony of emotions I’m processing as a human, a pastor, a Black woman, a Black mother of a Black son, a Black wife to a Black man.

Ahmaud Arbery was shot on February 23, 2020. He’d been a star on his high school football team. His family described him as “a good, generous young man with a big heart.”¹ He’d been out for an afternoon jog when Gregory McMichael and his son, Travis, spotted him and decided he resembled the supposed perpetrator of recent local break-ins. The McMichaels armed themselves and followed Ahmaud

through the neighborhood. Another man, William “Roddie” Bryan, joined the McMichaels and recorded the encounter.

Ahmaud was unarmed. Later, on trial, Travis McMichael said Ahmaud was nonthreatening, never brandishing a weapon or shouting during the confrontation.²

In that snapshot of a moment, Ahmaud was innocent. I imagine him at peace in the moments before, the temperate Georgia air filling his lungs as he jogged. Then Gregory McMichael got out of his truck, began struggling with Ahmaud, and fired his shotgun three times. Two of those shots lodged in Ahmaud’s chest.

As I sit and process, nearly three months after Ahmaud was shot, the three men involved in his murder have finally been arrested and charged.³ Because the pursuit was filmed and perhaps because most Americans were home quarantined, the inhumanity of the event would stun some, shock others (but not all), and inspire social media posts, tributes, and calls for justice. People across the country would eventually lace up their sneakers to run, walk, and bike 2.23 miles in memory of Ahmaud.⁴

But before the posts and hashtags, before the shares and likes, my husband and I are just here: heaving and crying and sitting in the silence on our living room floor. Delwin and I sit with all of it—not all the hype, but the hurt.

Eventually, the hurt gives way to a sobering presence of mind followed by a wave of panic and a side dish of dread.

We’re supposed to lead tonight.

Our church’s midweek experience will be prerecorded and then streamed to our faith community, inviting them into worship and prayer. And I know I can’t compartmentalize my pain and show up with a dabbed face, fresh eyeliner, and forced smile.

“We have to say something tonight,” I repeat.

Say Good

When the pressure mounts culturally, politically, relationally, what do we choose to say? What about when that pressure isn't just outside us but also within us, grating and griding against our most easily bruised pain points as the most egregious of injustices?

Note that the question isn't a matter of *if*. We have all been given voices to use as instruments of truth, tuned to the sound of the same Voice that spoke life into the void “in the beginning,”⁵ giving us God's image to bear, God's voice and heart to carry. This Voice led people out of bondage and into a Promised Land, into the realization of healing, restored community, and liberation. This Voice conquered death on a jagged and splintered beam of brutality and said, “It is finished,”⁶ declaring that what looked like defeat was actually victory waiting to be resurrected. And this Voice has echoed across history in the throats of men and women who spoke, shouted, and even whispered into darkness, destruction, and division.

So it is never a question of *if* we'll speak. As image-bearers, reflecting the One who spoke life into the void, we carry voices within our God-given nature. The real question is *when*—and what we'll choose to say. If God, at the end of six days of work, could call that which was spoken into being “very good,”⁷ then the words that roll up from our gut through our tight and dry throats and off the tips of our twisted tongues must mirror not just the urgency of human instinct but what is good—even very good.

In a world where the headlines seem to make bad news sound tame and trivial, to say good words may seem like too high a bar. But the bar is set just so because the stakes are high—as is the potential for personal humiliation, sabotage, or relational damage. We are increasingly accessible and visible, and we live connected to one

another and the world through social media. One line from a blog or speech gets overemphasized or undercut. A post gets reshared or screenshot, saved for later as either daily devotional or destructive blackmail. Even if we say something in private, the childhood game of telephone can take over on a public and global scale, moving from fingers to Twitter or Facebook instead of through cupped hands to innocent ears.

In the midst of all these colliding pressures, I've found myself hemmed in with fears and questions—and I suspect you have too.

- *How will that sentence be interpreted?*
- *What will my family think when they read it?*
- *How will this impact my closest friendships?*
- *Will I be seen as inauthentic? A virtue signaler?*
- *What's the point? Who cares if I say anything anyway?*
- *But if I don't, others will think I don't care. I do care!*
- *Could I lose my job? My good reputation?*

These fears and questions are loud. So we type and we delete. We record and we rerecord—one, two, three, sixteen times to get it just right. Some of us will turn the comments off. Some of us will keep the comments on, cracking our knuckles to the tune of “Eye of the Tiger,” ready to respond to whoever might dare oppose us. Some of us will try to engage peaceably or privately, in a direct message or even face-to-face.

But all of us feel the stress as we try to balance our gut instincts with the realities of how and where our words will land. So why attempt this balancing act at all? Because in the circus of our world's messes, we know that

if we can call on the courage and the wisdom,
if we can scrape enough good words together,
we might be surprised by hope—even healing—on the other side.

Good words have power. Good words carry with them the potential to keep meaningful relationships from devolving into distance and dysfunction. They have the capacity to build up confidence and tear down division; to create community in the crevices of vulnerability; to shape safe havens where people are no longer anonymous social media bots to be battled but exquisite image-bearers to be seen, loved, and known.

Words have started wars. What if learning to balance our words could heal hateful hearts?

Our Inner Circus

When I was a little girl, my mother read me a book entitled *Mirette on the High Wire*, about a little girl who learns to walk on a tightrope.⁸ I always thought Mirette was a little extreme. There was nothing to catch her if she fell—no net, no harness, nothing. And yet, there was a bravery to her choice I still can't shake, even now.

Mirette conquered her intimidation and fear of the tightrope . . . by walking it. She didn't think too hard about it, she didn't waffle back and forth. She decided she would walk the rope, and in walking it, she grew to trust her ability and skill. I wonder, as we find ourselves between skyscrapers of opinion, difference, and injustice, if the same could be true of us—if by stewarding our voices and having the confidence to walk into tension and discomfort, we can navigate the chaos by refusing to abandon it.

This kind of confidence doesn't happen by accident though. You wouldn't take an elevator to the top floor of Chicago's Willis Tower (it'll always be the "Sears" Tower to me) and just decide to take up tightrope walking on a whim. Instead, I imagine you'd find a *really* successful coach, start with strength training and conditioning, maybe work on your balance on the rusty red beam at the local playground. Suddenly you're in an epic eighties montage. Tentative steps precede effortless and sure ones. Amateur wiggles come before a firm frame and core that can withstand even the strongest gusts of Midwestern wind.

In the hard and necessary work of using our voice in the pressures, tensions, and injustices around us, what might paralyze us most isn't necessarily the metal beam or the height of the tower. What might keep us from stepping forward, from speaking, might just be our own disbelief in our ability to cross the expanse. Some of us are paralyzed, overwhelmed by how thin the wire really is. Others might need to discern when to close their lips.

When the tightrope no longer takes our breath away, when our skills are sharp and our confidence is high, the tension no longer compels us to make bad or hasty decisions. We might check the wind and weather conditions and decide—without shame—that today is a day to stay home and do something else. We'll know when it's the right time to get back on the rope. But to get to that kind of confidence, to find our own footing as we speak (or stay silent) in the face of looming tensions, we have to start with the slow, steady work of conditioning—and that's the journey we're going to take in this book.

Part of that work is discovering that not all voices are meant to resound the same. Some of our voices brave the silence around kitchen tables, shattering the hush with compassionate dissent, while others fill spaces beyond their wildest dreams, ringing from podiums before hundreds or thousands. Some might ping amidst the rafters of

OUR GREAT BALANCING ACT

an old dusty church, while others might sway in the vaulted ceilings of an established city hall. Some will find a home in the ear of a newborn child, while others might comfort a loved one in their hospital bed. Some voices will speak; others will type or pen or strum or hum. Every one of them has worth.

Do you know the uniqueness of your own voice? What it sounds like, where it lives, what it responds to, where it rests? Do you know the good that is yours alone to say?

In the pages that follow, you'll come to know your voice and grow in your confidence to use it, to brave the height and terrain and the thin length of space between people, problems, possibilities. You'll be introduced to four strong pillars from which you can fashion balancing poles to help you more confidently discern your voice and navigate in times of tension or complexity, no matter where those circumstances may meet you. You'll find that in coming to know your voice, you'll also come to know the non-anxious gift of silence. You won't be pressured by it, but comforted; you won't be stuck, but soothed. Both speaking and silence will find you exactly where you're meant to be.

Each of us has been given a voice so we can use it. None of us are meant to lean solely on the crutch of someone else's words but to speak into the voids we are uniquely called to enter. I must use my voice. You must use yours. Without each of us finding our footing, grasping and gifting the good we are called to, the intimidation of the space between us wins. We lose out on the breath-taking expanse of what's possible. Yes, you'll stumble in the process. You may even fall. But you cannot let the possibility of risk deter the good that is uniquely yours to say. One day soon, if that day has not already presented itself, you'll find yourself processing either the sharpness of pain or the warmth of righteous anger, and you, too, might speak up: "I have to say something."

When that moment comes, you'll know if it is your voice that's needed, your time to speak. You'll no longer hesitate or discount yourself. And know this: When you take that first step to close the chasm, it won't be effortless—but it will be meaningful. It may not be perfect, without wobble or pause, but perfect isn't a prerequisite in this process of trying to build something more permanent, more vibrant and hope filled than the theatrics within our world's transient Big Top of spectacle and slander. You'll open your mouth or your pen cap, your laptop or your guitar case, and you'll speak.

So how do we know when and how to use our voices—not just to do good but to *say* good? In this book, we'll lay a foundation that will help us steward our voices well. We'll then explore four solid guideposts—what we'll be calling the PAIR pillars—that will hold us steady:

- Passion
- Accountability
- Influence
- Relationship

No matter our background or stage of life, these pillars make up our structure of discernment—what burdens are ours to carry, what stories are ours to tell. They'll help us measure how far we should choose to wade into a given controversy, how quickly we should react to a personal tension.

You may come to find that the heft of a particular pillar might leave you tired and out of breath, having expended your best effort but with no discernible results. Maybe you'll wake up noticeably irritated, feathers ruffled yet again by a disturbing headline, another school shooting, a deadly earthquake on the other side of the world,

OUR GREAT BALANCING ACT

or a devastating crisis in your own backyard. Knowing which pillar is helping you and which one needs a break allows your heart to catch up to your head so you can stay engaged emotionally as well as mentally. You don't need (and should not expect) to master all four at the same time. Take comfort in the grace afforded you to focus on a given pillar as a unique season or circumstance requires.

“In the beginning” was the preamble to creation, opening the space and the deep to the possibility of life.

This is *your* beginning.

Welcome to the first step in facing our great balancing act,
in walking your calling faithfully,
in committing to say good.

PART I

Start with the Basics



Walking the way of discernment will surely invite self-imposed and unforeseen tensions, and we'll need to face those head-on if we're going to stay the course. And so, before we try any high-flying feats, we have to acknowledge the basics, the fundamentals of learning to say good, the foundations of walking in wisdom.

Even in the basics of balancing our voice and our influence, practice will never make perfect. But I can promise you that practice makes . . . better—not necessarily in the obvious spaces where complete strangers can see your progress through their accidental thumb-scrolling but in the fractional difference between catastrophic insecurity and confident engagement.

Practicing the basics helps us learn both the spaces where our voices may be sorely needed and the ones where we are humbly invited to sit still, to listen, to disengage and trust that this space wasn't ours to fully occupy in the first place. If we're not committed to that balance and fine-tuning, we'll soon find ourselves committed to one of two ends of the tightrope:

1. *Thoughts*. On this end, we feel tempted not just to have but to verbalize potentially malformed opinions to a captive, sometimes unknown audience.
2. *Prayers*. This is the side of silence, of saying nothing out of fear, apathy, or cowardice. Here, even if we believe in and are assured of prayer's spiritual power, we use prayer as an excuse to shrink away from our participation in God's work, allowing other human voices to fill the spaces where we are called to speak.

Thoughts will be intermittent at best or overwhelming at worst. *Prayers* may well be sincere, but staying in this space is inaction. God can choose to move, we may think, but God can move without us; we'll stay right here.

Neither option requires us to walk.

This walk must start with finding how to balance: knowing ourselves, learning our core, understanding our pace and space. It requires an awareness of gravity, knowing what tools help us not to fight the forces around us but to work with them. We must start closer to the ground than we'd like to admit, exercising the good of our voices for the first time not before captive crowds of thousands but in arenas far less famous or flashy: the family cookout when an

START WITH THE BASICS

uncle says something sexist, the playground when your child is the bully and not the friend.

The basics help us learn steadiness. The basics help us not to react wildly to the wobbles and winds but to know we can hold fast when they come. When a headline hits our hearts like a ton of bricks or when news from the other end of the phone rings in our ears like high-pitched horror, the basics help us ground our voices in peaceable presence. We no longer anxiously react but lovingly respond—because the basics help hold us still.

CHAPTER 1

BALANCE

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes. If it were always a fist or always stretched open, you would be paralysed. Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding, the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated as birdwings.

RUMI,
“Birdwings”

Do you read the word *balance* as a noun or a verb?

As a child, I had an intense love-hate relationship with the seesaw. Back in the nineties, when playground structure safety wasn't a high priority, seesaws were made of either heinie-scorching metal or—in the case of my playground—wood. The beams would scrape the insides of my thighs as I crouched low, feet firmly planted on wood chips or dusty dirt as I waited for a friend to struggle up onto the other side. Then one of us would use all our prepubescent strength to launch ourselves into the air. We'd bound up, then brace ourselves at the bottom, up and down and up and down.

I was never only ever pushing away, nor was I perpetually floating above the earth. For the seesaw to work, you had to do both. Too much pushing, and you'd tire out easily. No pushing at all, and

everything would come to a sad, anticlimactic end, one person swinging a leg up and off as the other crouched, alone and leg-splintered. Balance was the point.

If you assume *balance* is a noun, it becomes an inanimate aspiration or object, such as when we speak of the ever-elusive “work-life balance” or when I watch one of my daughters mount a beam at gymnastics. We can’t always feel the balance, but we know it’s something to be conquered. We don’t always know what balance looks like, but we hope we’ll figure it out as we go: a little more self-care, a little less clutter; a little more water intake, a little less alcohol; more devotional time, less doomscrolling on social media. Balance. The noun.

But if we are going to steward our own voices well and for good, balance must be a verb.

One day at work in the summer of 2022, I stood up from my desk—and the world tilted. I found it hard to stand upright, so I grabbed the doorframe behind me, steadied myself with a firm grip on the cold beam, and then carefully proceeded forward in an attempt to reach the restroom. But each step I took only keeled me further and further into a panicked discombobulation.

I had to make a decision: Either I needed to sit back down, or I had to balance myself and search for help. I chose the latter. And so from the farthest northern stretch of our office’s hallway, I began the impossibly long walk to find my husband, who was also on our staff team. With every couple of steps, I moved my hand along the cubicle walls to my left, my fingertips sometimes touching more cold gray metal, sometimes grazing the rough surface of textured fabric. With most of my weight on my left hand, I paused in between gaps, mustering the energy and focus to balance until I reached the next stretch of wall.

As I finally made it to the main office entrance, the room continued to spin. I lay down and waited for staff members to call my

husband—and an ambulance. I could walk no farther. All I could do was lie there and wait.

Balance was the vivid verb and not the aspirational noun to me that day. It was a series of actions and movement and careful steps in the midst of disorientation. And the same happens when we enter into tension and conflict and complexity. Balance becomes an action, a movement, a series of choices and careful steps into the world that we attend to and negotiate and tweak.

If we're going to walk our words toward good, we're going to need to balance.

Find Your Center

If you google any “how to walk on a tightrope” video, you'll likely hear someone mention the importance of your center of mass. To balance effectively, a tightrope walker must keep his or her center of mass over the rope. Any movement to the left or right, and the rope will begin to swing back and forth.¹

Somewhere, at some time—and maybe that time is now—each of us has lost our center. Perhaps you feel like you're spiraling into the doorframe of your life without much explanation or any sense of control. Your family is in shambles; your friendships are shallow or nonexistent; your career is stagnant; you don't feel as sharp as you used to. Maybe you're like me at the time of this writing, navigating an unexpected health crisis that has left you exhausted and eager for some kind of way forward. The invitation? **Come back to center.**

But more than that, we are part of collective humanity, and I venture to say that there, too, we have lost our center. In our Western, American culture. Our two-party political system. The multiple splits

and factions within church denominations. We are nation against nation, migrants and refugees and natural-born citizens. The large *we* encircles us like gusts of wind, shaking the wire and tilting the poles in our hands.

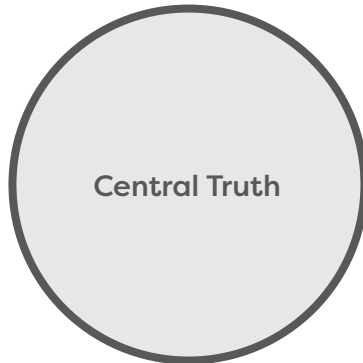
The larger *we* must come back to center too.

But what exactly determines that center?

For some of us, it's our values, the ideals that matter most to us. "Faith, family, football!" the good Texan in me might say. But our center is more than just a pithy phrase. Finding our center means knowing the core truths we can lean on when life gets dizzying. What do you believe that will hold fast, no matter the outside forces or surprises? Those are the truths my father would say "you know that you know that you know."

Before we outwardly offer our voices to the world, before we speak into the work of justice or compassion or advocacy, we must establish our inward center.

So I ask you: What truth do you come back to?



This is the center I come back to: the character of One I know whose character doesn't change, whose steadiness is forever. I still hear

the low, rumbling tenor of my maternal grandmother, even though she's been gone from this earth for over seven years:

*Because He lives
I can face tomorrow
Because He lives
All fear is gone
Because I know
He holds the future
And life is worth the living
Just because He lives²*

Her belief in those words tethered my faith to a core truth not new to me, one that existed beyond and before I or that song ever did. That deeper truth stretches back through the annals of my family's history: through a dusty town in the middle of Texas, beyond a generation facing the threatening gusts of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s, and all the way back to the transatlantic slave trade to the shores of the western horn of Africa. In those words, I hear echoes from the Holy Bible, from Lamentations, a book whose very name echoes hardship and struggle:

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.³

Your center may be different—whether a meaningful religious conviction, a set of values or principles you were taught at a younger

age, or some other source—but it must come with you over whatever canyon you're crossing. If you don't hold your center as you step into whatever lies ahead, shallow or quick quips become words you wish you could take back. Insults or ill-informed monologues hinder the hope for trust or restored relationship. Only that core truth can carry you as you're practicing, swaying back and forth, or even falling. Only that core truth, your security and your reason, will remain secure in the face of whatever tests it.

Strengthen Your Core

I roll over on the mat, out of breath and irritated. The instructor on the screen smiles and waves goodbye to her online audience, but I'm still heaving and huffing, waiting for my heartbeat to calm itself. That delightfully toned woman hardly broke a sweat while having the audacity to tell me what to do. After twenty minutes of crunches, bird-dogs, toe touches, and hollow rocks, the pit of my stomach feels sore and useless. I have no more in me. But still—I know that, over time, I'll thank myself for checking off another grueling core workout.

You see, according to Harvard Health,

Your core stabilizes your body, allowing you to move in any direction, even on the bumpiest terrain, or stand in one spot without losing your balance. Viewed this way, core exercises can lessen your risk of falling.⁴

Any direction? On the bumpiest terrain? That means balancing on a tightrope isn't necessarily only about inertia, acceleration, or friction. It's not even about our feet. A whole group of muscles toward

the center of our bodies—including our abdominals, obliques, pelvic floor, back, spine, glutes, and diaphragm—help usher us forward.

If we need our center to ground us, we must also have a support structure to both strengthen and reenforce that central truth. The support structure allows us to move more naturally through even the most tension-ridden subjects with grace and confidence. Our center gives us something to focus on; our core lessens our risk of falling into the abyss of tomfoolery that clouds our collective discernment and our view of humanity's innate value.

Find a Pole That Fits

I'm in elementary school, working on a science project that will demonstrate my freshly acquired knowledge about levers and pulleys: a hoist-up-and-down kitchen bucket inside a homemade well for my American Girl doll. I already have a tin can to serve as my well, an old cylindrical Folgers container from the coffee that my dad, a salesman, burned through in no time between routine meetings and domestic travel. I walk outside in the Texas heat, the white-patterned concrete below me reflecting the glow of our warm-yellow porch lights, and I find a twig that I snap to the just-right length. I set the stick between two popsicle sticks that rest on opposite walls of the can.

However, I'm still missing a critical piece. The beige string from my craft box rests to the side, but I need a crank, something I can turn in order to wind the string around the stick. I search in kitchen draws and cabinets, but no luck. Finally, my search leads me to our living room, and I rummage through the drawer next to my dad's regal grandfather clock. That's where I find it: a polished wooden crank with a glimmering golden extension. It's perfect.

I run back to the kitchen and begin attaching the string to both

the bucket and the crank, ready to wind it around the stick and see my well through to completion. Perhaps I'll even put some water in it to see if I can earn bonus points for functionality.

My strategic dream of scientific superiority comes to an abrupt halt when my dad walks into the kitchen.

"Ashlee, what are you doing?"

"My science project, Dad."

"Not with the crank to my grandfather clock, you're not."

"This is a crank to your grandfather clock?"

"Not just *a* crank, but *the* crank. You insert it into the holes on the dial, and it winds the three weights to keep the clock ticking."

Well, shoot. The tool I thought I was using to further my creative thinking had inadvertently turned me into a petty thief.



One of the best funambulists (the term for tightrope walkers) of all time was Jean François Gravelet, nicknamed "Blondin." He began self-training in the art of tightrope walking at age four, using his father's fishing rod as his pole.⁵ Eventually, Blondin became the first person to tightrope walk across the gorge below Niagara Falls, and he repeated that same act seventeen times. "He crossed blindfolded, he crossed on stilts and he crossed with his manager on his back. Once he carried a stove, stopped at the midpoint and cooked himself an omelette."⁶

But Blondin didn't start with a stove.

The pole keeps a tightrope walker steady and sure, certain of their footing. When it comes to finding our way and refining new skills across tricky terrain, we would do well not to start with a stove (or someone else's indispensable clock crank)—that situation you can't quite put your words around or maneuver with a certain level of

confidence. It may seem like a good idea right now (points for creativity!), but in reality, that situation belongs to someone else who can carry the weight more wisely. **If you're just learning how to tightrope walk, you need to find a pole that fits.** Something that fits you is likely already in your vicinity and well within your reach. It's a skill or gift you have that may seem easy for you to hold before you on display, even if you've been tempted to compare it to someone else's. It's an area of expertise, a hard-won respectability. It's the strength of a safe relationship, the compassion of community. The right fit will emerge from the fabric of your gifts and not exploit your brokenness.

If you are longing to enter into hard topics and flammable conversations with any level of confidence, find courage in knowing you already have some tools at hand. You're going to have to discern what specifically keeps you steady and stable when the wind picks up and the wire starts swaying.

We might find balance with a family member or friend we admire, someone who will love us well and reassure us when stuff gets rough. Maybe we're steadied through a passion or career we've given healthy energy to, or a group of friendships we've worked hard to nurture and that we've allowed to nurture us in return. For me, my faith provides that centering point. My faith is not a religion or an object that I tangibly hold as much as it is a gift of a good foundation, solid ground where I choose to reorient myself. As the song goes,

*On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.⁷*

The ground I choose to stand on at the end of the day, the reality that steadies me in disruption and uncertainty, is the faithfulness of the One in whom I put my trust.

Whatever your balancing apparatus, you have to be able to trust it to be a constant. Whatever helps you stay centered and steady won't necessarily be what steadies your neighbor, sister, or significant other—it has to fit *you*. It may be bigger than you, but it cannot overwhelm you. It cannot shake or break or become flimsy when the stakes are highest.

That apparatus, then, cannot be your iPhone or Android or Blackberry (assuming some of us still use those). It cannot be programmed for planned obsolescence or trick you into shame spirals. Your stabilizing force cannot suck you into unfocused mindlessness or be part of your unhealthy escape, whether that escape be through a screen or through the pages of a book. Whatever steadies you—faith in God, love for family, or pursuit of future goals and dreams—needs to be constant, tried and true.

Part of fine-tuning how we say good must be finding what supports us, what can help us find our feet again when we inevitably stumble or fall flat on our rear. When our ego is bruised and feelings are hurt, we've got to know what centers us and holds us upright, an aid we don't mind holding close, right in front of us, parallel to the very plane of our heart.

When you find a pole that fits, one that won't waver, you'll be bolstered even when you're exhausted from the grueling fight to say the good thing. You'll find the grace to begin again when you're worn and tired; inspired to keep going, even when the journey across breaking news seems darker and more narrow. You'll be strengthened to figure out the good you want to say or the silence you need to keep. When you're steady, you may sense fear up ahead, but it's hazy, small, and harmless. What's close and more discernable is courage.

Letting Go

Letting go is part of balance. When you step onto the wire, you start with very little: a fishing pole, maybe eventually a longer one to extend your mass and improve your balance, but nothing more. Everything else might need to be left behind.

Many of us approach hard conversations or divisive topics with trepidation, uncertain whether we should even be there in the first place. When Ahmaud Arbery was killed, more than one friend or social media follower privately told me they hesitated to speak up. Most were white women who sincerely wanted to speak out against murders like Ahmaud's that were rooted in a history of racism and racial oppression. But they didn't feel informed or practiced enough to know what to say or where or how, acknowledging both the need to center Black voices and their desire to be present in solidarity with those who were hurting. I could sense their deepest hope was to be proximate without being performative; to engage without egregious virtue-signaling; to be decisively courageous and not dismissive.

I could appreciate the tension.

Many of my white friends had, somewhere along their journey of advocating for racial justice, become hyperaware of the need to avoid shedding “white tears”—“a phrase [used] to describe what happens when certain types of White people either complain about a non-existent racial injustice or are upset by a non-White person's success at the expense of a White person.”⁸ But was there room for shared grief? For tears that stemmed from unadulterated empathy? Holy outrage about injustice and historic dehumanization?

Whether you're a white person coming to the tightrope with questions or insecurities—or a person of color coming to the same

tightrope with trauma, fear, or even a little bit of apathy—the process of using your voice will ask you to let go of something. If you choose to carry a heap of baggage with you as you negotiate the first few steps, chances are you'll fall, weighed down by something you never needed in the first place.

Of course, there will be pieces of ourselves we cannot—and should not—let go of, like our integrity, our personalities and perspectives, our central truth, and our core pillars. But we'll have to examine other parts more purposefully. Some of us have histories of trauma that we've honored but have not yet fully excavated. For others, there are unexamined and potentially unhealthy motives that propel us forward, those motives serving more to numb us or distract us from the deeper issues. Do these parts serve us on this particular journey? Or would it be wiser to take a closer look at those parts before initiating what might feel like a death-defying feat? Is our trauma contained and processed enough for us to be a help to ourselves and others—or are we still too raw to access those gifts? Are we so driven that we're willing to leave a trail of bruised bodies in our wake, unconcerned with how our motivations might negatively impact not only other people but the ultimate purpose of our journey?

What do you need to let go of?

I used to think tightrope walkers were egocentric daredevils. But actually, surrendering a part of your life requires profound humility. You must be fearless in facing every part of yourself. You must go in, knowing you could fail catastrophically. You must understand just how much is outside your control. You must be patient and disciplined, knowing you'll need to endure bruises, scrapes, and embarrassment long before you'll achieve the success you're aiming for. You'll have to live with the reality that others are watching and that some of those watching might never understand.

As we approach the tightrope, we don't just need to lay down our baggage; we also need to let go of our pride. Pride will keep us from moving forward, encouraging us to stay where we are and not learn anything new, because we're fine right here. Letting go, on the other hand, means we'll have to keep moving, picking one foot up while the other stays put, over and over and over again. Sometimes we'll wobble, sometimes we'll fall, but eventually we'll look down and find that we've made progress—perhaps only to the middle, but then eventually to the other side. We'll have made it despite the odds.

In his words to the church at Philippi, the apostle Paul coaches us into the heart of what it means to practice humility on the journey:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.⁹

So, to my white girlfriends who are worried about inward motivations and outward appearances; to my Black brothers and sisters who are tired, worn out, angry, apathetic; to those who are trying to figure out when to speak up in their workplaces, how to engage at holiday tables, PTO meetings, and happy hours—balance requires not an ever-enduring and tight-fisted grasp but an emptying. As you speak, are you willing not only to be the one who fills but sometimes the one who's emptied? Are you willing not only to put your foot down but also to pick it up and place it gently forward in the name of progress, even if that progress is slower than you want it to be?