

# “Strong and Weak”

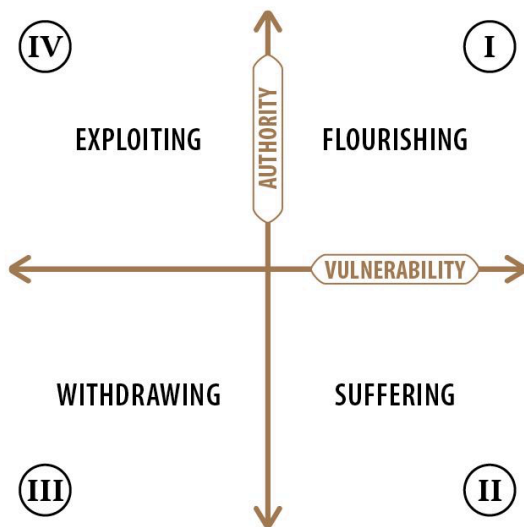
## “Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing”

### Paradox of Flourishing

Each of us wants to flourish, not suffer. We want abundant, generous, and full lives. We want our words and actions to mean something in the world. Yet we often don't know how to get there. After all, many of us don't know what we're meant to be or, if we do, why there's a gap between our hopes and our realities.

Flourishing doesn't come from being just strong. The paradox is that **it comes from being both strong and weak in equal measure.**

The 2x2 chart below depicts the nature of this paradox, formed by two axes—authority and vulnerability.



The vertical axis is **authority**, which is the capacity for meaningful action. It's about how much we can make a difference in our world. It's "meant to characterize every image bearer," because it's a part of what being given "dominion" over creation means.

The horizontal axis is **vulnerability**, which is our exposure to meaningful risk. "The vulnerability that leads to flourishing," "requires risk, which is the possibility of loss—the chance that when we act, we will lose something we value."

### Four Quadrants

Properly combined, authority and vulnerability lead "up and to the right" to **Flourishing (I)**—that is, to "abundant life" (John 10:10), the "life that really is life" (1 Tim. 6:19). It's engagement, hope, and dignity. It's "what love longs to be."

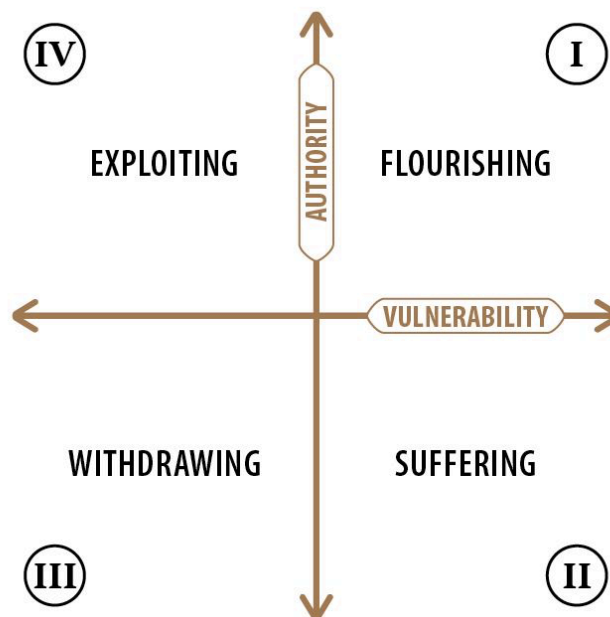
This type of flourishing, however, is not synonymous with health, wealth, growth, and gentrification. Those are mere images of a prosperity gospel in a consumerist society. The real test of human flourishing is "how it cares for the most vulnerable."

When either authority or vulnerability is absent—or even worse, when both are missing—we find distortions: suffering, withdrawing, and exploiting.

**Suffering (II)** is vulnerability without authority. It has no capacity for meaningful action but great exposure to meaningful risk. All of us, will one day live in this quadrant and feel its poverty, deprivation, and oppression—whether it comes through loss, injustice, or death.

**Withdrawing (III)** is no authority or vulnerability. It’s “the worst of all,” because it masks itself as comfort or safety, but it’s really abandonment, apathy, and fear of exposure. Our culture loves to withdraw by embracing simulated authority and illusory vulnerability—from pornography to gaming.

**Exploiting (IV)** is authority without vulnerability. It’s “the most seductive and dangerous quadrant.” It lures us with coping mechanisms that tell us we’re in control, as we shed our own vulnerability and exploit others. This section is particularly poignant for those who care about issues of injustice, policing, and race.



### Way to Flourishing

The paradox of flourishing, though, isn’t just about being strong and weak. 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.

1. The first is the journey to **hidden vulnerability**, the willingness to bear burdens and expose ourselves to risks that no one else can fully see or understand.
2. The second is **sacrifice**, the choice to visit the most broken corners of the world and our own heart.

Hidden vulnerability and descending to the dead call us to take these two journeys. We need to make them so that we can understand the danger of worshiping idols of power and influence, the temptation of becoming a tyrant ourselves, and the drift toward embracing hypocrisy.

**Jesus is the one person who held this elusive paradox in tandem—full authority and full vulnerability—for the sake of those He loved.**

- His authority was evident to everyone—at every turn of the Gospel narratives we see Jesus exercising unparalleled capacity for meaningful action, as well as restoring authority to the marginal and poor.
- But no one fully grasped Jesus’s vulnerability. Those around Him comprehended almost nothing of His true purpose and destination. The Gospel writers report that even when Jesus began to try to explain to His disciples the fate He knew awaited Him in Jerusalem, they resisted and did not understand. As His ministry brought Him nearer and nearer to the final confrontation with the forces of idolatry and injustice, only Jesus understood what was truly going to be lost.

**May we be followers who are both strong and weak for the sake of God’s glory and for the flourishing of ourselves and others.**

*For communicators, the final chapter of the book was particularly inspiring ...*

### **Do Your Homework**

I learned a very different lesson about public speaking from a man I’ll call Terry, whose remarkable career in business had culminated with an assignment as CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Terry was an unusual figure for a CEO, quiet almost to the point of shyness. After years leading smaller, privately held firms, his new role required him to give speeches to auditoriums full of investors or managers. Intimidated by the public-speaking demands, he had sought out his pastor.

“Terry, it’s easy,” his pastor said. **“You only have to do three things to be an effective public speaker. Do your homework, love your audience, and be yourself.”**

**“Do your homework, love your audience, and be yourself.”**

**Do your homework—acquire the proper authority to address the topic at hand. Love your audience—open yourself up to their vulnerability, their fears and dreams, their ambitions and failures, and see them for the image bearers they are, with their own authority and capacity. And then be yourself—bring your own authority and vulnerability together, in all your beloved incompleteness, in their presence.** Like all the best maxims, it is both utterly simple and a life’s work to fulfill.

Terry found that this simple framework gave him exactly what he needed to step into his new role. Before every speaking engagement, he would ask himself, *Have I done my homework?* Years of accommodating a learning disability had taught him how to master material through painstaking effort, so the answer was always yes.

He could shift his attention to the central question, *Do I love this audience?* That became his primary focus in the hours or days before a speech—envisioning the particular people who would be in the room and tuning his mind and heart to what would serve them best. Then, when he walked on stage, he had just one assignment:

to be himself. The anxiety that used to surround public speaking disappeared. In its place was the authority and vulnerability that has led his company to flourish.

I mentioned Terry's three-step framework to James, the actor. "Exactly," he said. "And I would add that to love your audience is actually to need something from your audience— to go out on stage knowing that if they don't meet you, give you what you need, you can't do what you came to do. Real love only exists where there is a mutual need."

Given his busy schedule, I am certain that Terry has to repeat and reuse material, just like the speaker I heard twice in the same year. For that matter, Terry, too, arrives at many of his engagements on a private plane. They are superficially similar in their status, wealth and position. But the demands of leadership that have made one of them more distant over time have made the other more present. The same pressures that have led one to retreat into his authority have led the other to open himself up in vulnerability— to need others, to ask for advice and to continue to learn.

I want to be like Terry and others who have shown me what real authority and real vulnerability mean, the ones who have drawn me into true flourishing. I want to be a saint— to become part of the ultimate meaningful story, taking hold of the life that really is life.

The great news is that it is possible. Do your homework— prepare for authority. Love your neighbor, enough to need them, enough to know what they need—open yourself to vulnerability. And then be yourself—show up with all that you have and all that you are and all the truth of what you will never be.

## Laughter

The stories we tell our friends, and often tell ourselves, fall overwhelmingly into two categories: stories where we are the hero and stories where we are the victim.

Hero stories feature us overcoming great odds and fierce opposition, often with a note of righteous triumph thrown in for good measure. Sitting on planes, I've overheard a lot of hero stories as people settle into their seats and call their loved ones. They tell them how they beat the traffic, how they got the last spot in the overhead bins, how they persuaded an unwilling agent to upgrade them to first class. Sitting in college dining halls, I've heard stories of turning in papers just before the deadline after a brutal all-nighter.

Hero stories are authority stories— ways of signaling to our friends that we are lucky, good or both. They are always selective at best, exaggerated at worst.

Then there are victim stories, which of course are vulnerability stories. We describe being cut off by an aggressive driver in a luxury car, missing the flight because the security lines were so long, being stood up by the world's most horrible date.

The theme of victim stories is actually the same as the theme of hero stories: our own vindication in an unfair world. We are well-intentioned and undeserving of our fate, at the mercy of petty or cosmic conspiracies, too small for the forces arrayed against us.

**Our true story is not really about us— it is about our rescuer.**

Whether we tell hero or victim stories, we are constantly tempted to exaggerate. As I write this chapter, America's most prominent television news presenter has seen his career rocked by an untrue tale of barely surviving a helicopter crash after coming under fire in Afghanistan— a tale that managed to present him both as victim and as hero. (In fact, his helicopter was miles away from the incident he “misremembered.”)

But there is another kind of story we all could tell— a story that paints us in a very different light. It is a rescue story.

“I once was lost, but now am found”— that is no exaggeration. The more we grasp how truly we lost hold of our true calling, how completely we were in the grip of injustice, safety and poverty, the more we realize how great the rescue has been, how little we ourselves can claim for our own credit.

Our true story is not really about us— it is about our rescuer. He arrives in our story and acts with authority— he is the true hero. And yet he also bears our vulnerability— he offers himself as the victim. His arrival in the story sets us free to flourish. And the mark of his arrival is not the hero's grim shout of triumph or the victim's grim cry of despair, but the distinctive sound of those surprised by joy: laughter.

*“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’” (Psalm 126:1-2)*

If you want one last picture of authority and vulnerability together, laughter will do the trick. To laugh, to really laugh out loud, is to be vulnerable, taken beyond ourselves, overcome by surprise and gratitude. And to really laugh may be the last, best kind of authority— the capacity to see the meaning of the whole story and discover that our final act, our only enduring responsibility in that story, is simply celebration, delight and worship.

After we have borne our hidden vulnerability, even after we have descended to the dead, after we have been rescued from our suffering, our withdrawing, our exploiting— we will be raised up, restored to our rightful place. And we will laugh.

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