

A BEAUTIFUL MESS

By the same author:

Challenging Evil

Just Imagine: The Social Justice Agenda

The Liberating Truth

Boundless

A BEAUTIFUL MESS

How God re-creates our lives

Danielle Strickland

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*To my Mom and Dad,
who endured the chaos
and were catalysts for
the beautiful mess of
my new life in
God's Kingdom.*

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Introduction

When people ask me how my “work” is going I almost always reply, “It’s a beautiful mess.” I get a mixed response. Sometimes people measure success in stages of meticulous order. Others are gifted at crafting plans that are perfectly designed – with sub-points for specific ministry goals at the exact incremental stages for optimum growth. I’ve always envied lives that seem perfect. I’ve never had one.

My experience of life with God is messy. It’s a mix of failure and success, courage and fear, faith and doubt. It’s – well, a beautiful mess. If I were to tell the truth, since God invaded my life and welcomed me into a world of creative beauty, my whole life has been a beautiful mess. It’s beautiful because it’s a witness to the creative design of God’s love in the here and now of our lives. My life doesn’t look anything like it once did... I’ve been re-created by a designer who loves to recycle.

My life has taken a new shape. It’s characterized by light and love; it’s an expanding world that is constantly changing and yet I remain rooted in the foundations of God’s love. It’s filled with simple and complex truths that lead me to trust God and join Him in the invitation to bring heaven to earth.

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It's a celebration that, even if it looks a little out of control – it's in the control of a loving God who has a plan.

So, this book is an invitation. You are invited to journey into God's creative plan to make a beautiful mess of your life and your plans. Like a master artist, He is ready to take the colours of your current life and craft them into a beauty that is beyond our comprehension.

This is how everything began, of course. With the original materials of a dark and shapeless void, the Hebrew creation story pictures an artist God who brings forth beauty from chaos. This story isn't used in this book as a scientific blueprint design, but as a window into the heart and strategies of a master designer. I'm amazed at how the original design has implications in the way He is still designing. Shaping in us new beginnings of beauty.

The heart of this book is to celebrate the ability of a grand artist to make a beautiful mess out of everything, and then to join Him in the process. Here's to living a re-created life.

Danielle Strickland

Summer 2014

Chapter One

Inevitable Chaos

We should start at the beginning. It's how it all began. The world was created out of chaos. This is one of the most fascinating parts of the story from the Hebrews. And it's a bit like all the other creation accounts from every other story told by people to try to explain why we exist. How it all started. *Chaos*. It's familiar in every single creation account on the planet and, if we are honest, it's also present in every one of our personal lives. Chaos.

It lurks around every corner, waiting to grab us by the ankles. It hides in the middle of every conversation, waiting to unsettle us and cause us to question. It nestles in the heart of every activist who dares to believe that the status quo sucks. And it bubbles under the surface in every boardroom where some people secretly remember the story of the founder that seems to have been lost in the pursuit of better margins, stronger profit, and happier shareholders.

What is "it"?

It's an invitation to rearrange everything. It's the starting place for creation. It's the bucket of paint that the artist can

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make into something beautiful. It's the possibility that things can change – for the better. Another name?

Chaos.

Encarta offers this definition of chaos:

- 1. a state of complete disorder and confusion**
- 2. cha-os or Cha-os the unbounded space and formless matter supposed to have existed before the creation of the universe**
- 3. the unpredictability inherent in a system such as the weather, in which apparently random changes occur as a result of the system's extreme sensitivity to small differences in initial conditions**

(*Encarta* 2005)

For many people, chaos is a negative word. It is something that has to be righted; it is to be sorted out or perhaps hidden to create the illusion of order, even if it is only a temporary measure. Common understanding tells us that chaos is only ever a destructive force, quickly needing to be nailed down so that order can be brought to situations both personally and in our work scenarios. But what if there was a different way to understand chaos?

What if chaos was a good thing?

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What if it was the root of all creativity?

What if it was the beginning of growth, personally and amongst the people and organizations we lead?

What if it was the seedbed of social change and transformation?

What if it loosed the chains of injustice?

What if it set captives free and actually began the process of repair in people's lives?

What if it did its thing, and everyone saw that it was "good"?

So here's the deal. Growth, whether personal or within an organizational structure, can only happen as a result of embracing chaos. Too many people have bought the idea that life is better without chaos, that unknowns are undesirable and the unexplainable is unnecessary.

C. S. Lewis, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* depicts Lucy standing at the wardrobe, with nowhere else to go. She is in the middle of an exciting game of hide-and-seek. There is literally just one place to hide and it is inside the wardrobe. She thinks it is like any other wardrobe, stuffed full of old coats and easily measurable in terms of size, and therefore a place of safety. She will stay in that musty space for as long as it takes. With her heart pounding, waiting to be found, she extends her hand out in front of her expecting to find the full extent of the depth of the wardrobe and so know just how far in she can hide. But instead of touching

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the “edge”, she finds more “space”, space that she can neither understand nor fathom. It literally makes no sense to her. It isn’t how it is meant to be. But instead of running away from this void, she moves towards it, embracing the potential and fear of what might be found there. And to her delight, so begins the story of a whole new world.

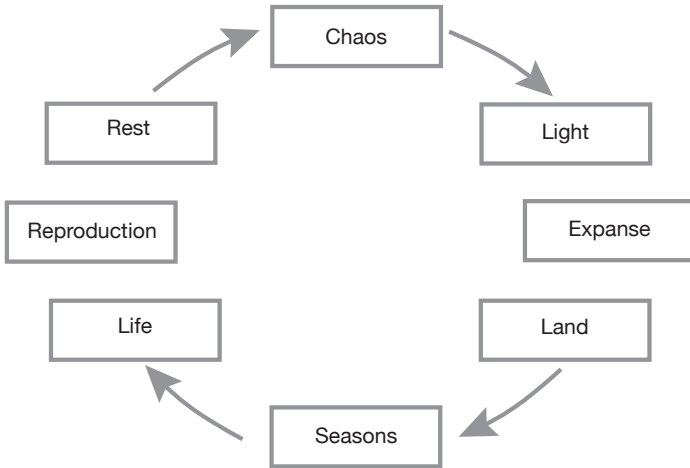
There is an old Hebraic story describing the creation of the world. It begins with Yahweh moving over the chaos and void.

“God created the heavens and earth – all you see, all you don’t see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss”.¹

The imagery is potent: of God above the chaos, yet strongly present in it. The story continues through a series of phases: first comes LIGHT, then EXPANSE, then LAND, then SEASONS, then LIFE, then REPRODUCTION and finally REST.

And this story gives us a divine pattern to the way of things. We call this a beautiful mess. It’s how God re-creates life. It looks like this:

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What God creates is very good. That's how He put it. Like an artist who can't wait to show you what has emerged – like a mum and dad who are beaming as they hold up their little baby; like a gardener, stepping back with dirt under his fingernails to admire the sheer beauty of the created – very good indeed.

But it all begins with chaos.

At the very core and heart of the story is this unmanageable, beautiful, wonderful disorder out of which everything else comes.

The point is that without the chaos, nothing else would have been born from it.

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Creation would not have been given breath.

It is all because of the chaotic beginning

that order is made possible.

It was never the other way round!

Chaos first, always.

But we live in a culture that seeks to hide chaos. To admit that there is chaos in your life is a sign of weakness and failure. To not have it together, or to not have life seemingly sorted, at least on the outside, is to have somehow dropped the Holy Grail.

For many people, this results in quite a significant cover-up job, where lives appear to have a serene veneer masking unanswered questions, swathes of self-doubt and stunted personal growth.

The truth is that we are afraid of things we can't control. Chaos is uncontrollable – by its definition you can't predict what it will do or what effect it will have. This makes those of us who fear change and loss of control very uneasy. We like to know what we are facing and we like to control our environment. But chaos doesn't care about our fear. Chaos enters and turns everything upside down. Perhaps this is the right treatment for those of us who think we hold it all together; those of us who are afraid of change and afraid of circumstances outside of our control. This "mess" called chaos reorders things in our lives... shifting and changing our values and reminding us of what's most important.

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I've been intrigued by the current popularity of zombies. What is it about zombies and the possibility of apocalypse that has captured the attention of a generation? I've been asking people what they think and I've been surprised by the results. Most of the people I've asked suggest that underneath the extreme controls of our modern world we wonder about deeper things. For example, what really matters. If all the shiny controlled neatness of our lives were taken away, what would be left? What would really matter?

What about the leading of programmes and initiatives? The same is true. To run a business that is neat and tidy, that is efficient but strangely similar to what it has been for the past x years is hailed by many as a good place to work and a mark of success. But a closer look informs you that life has been drained out of the organization. It could be merely going through the motions and creativity has been successfully subdued in honour of predictable and controllable order.

What if the pursuit of order has created a love of the status quo and has removed the passion for justice? What if we have made a friend of comfort instead of change and as a result removed ourselves from the responsibility that demands that we fight for change to happen? Wasn't it out of chaos that apartheid ended and the Iron Curtain fell?

This book is concerned with rediscovering chaos as the root of growth for us personally, organizationally and as the

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required instigator of transformation in local communities. It is about our ability to embrace this dynamic, to not shy away from it and to journey alongside others as they discover what it means in their own lives. Living is about functioning effectively with the unknown, about finding the path to the next landing point without necessarily knowing the destination or the route to take in advance. It is about being comfortable in what feels chaotic and recognizing the huge creativity and beauty of that place.

As we begin this journey, the words of Thomas Merton, an American Catholic who was part of the Order of the Strict Cistercians, provide us with sustenance for the outrageous chaos-marked adventure ahead.

**My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
Does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in
fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from
that desire.**

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And I know that if I do this
you will lead me by the right road though I may
know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though I may
seem
to be lost in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.²

Questions

- What is my first response to the thought of chaos?
What does this response show me about myself?
- How do I feel about unanswered questions and unresolved situations both personally and in the work context?
- When did I last experience chaos? What came as a result of this experience?
- How do I as a friend help others understand situations of chaos?