

Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing

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Two common temptations lure us away from abundant living – withdrawing into safety or grasping for power. True flourishing, says Andy Crouch, travels down an unexpected path – being both strong and weak.

With the characteristic insight, memorable stories and hopeful realism he is known for, Andy Crouch shows us how to walk this path so that the image of God can shine through us. Not just for our own good, but for the sake of others.

Angela: Vulnerable Flourishing

Like all my sister Melinda’s children, Angela, her third of four, was born in a plastic inflatable tub in the middle of their living room, attended by a midwife and surrounded by family – a scene that will give you some sense of my confident, resilient and countercultural sister. (My wife Catherine and I have preferred to experience the miracle of new life in, shall we say, more controlled environments.)

But the moment that Angela arrived in the world, the midwife’s patient and cheerful coaching shifted suddenly to decisive urgency. I will never forget picking up the phone, three hundred miles away, and hearing my father’s anguished voice as he struggled to say the words, “There’s something wrong with the baby.” By that time Melinda, her husband Dave, the midwife and Angela were already speeding toward the regional hospital, half an hour’s drive over mountain roads from their home.

There was indeed something wrong – one basic thing wrong, it turned out, that led to many other things wrong. Angela, doctors determined after days of tests, had three copies of her thirteenth chromosome, a condition called Trisomy 13. (The far more common condition called Down Syndrome involves an extra copy of the twenty-first chromosome – Trisomy 21.) Some babies are born with a milder “mosaic” version of this condition that only affects some cells. In Angela’s case, every cell had this debilitating extra set of instructions.

Many children with Trisomy 13 die before birth; half of those born alive die within the first week. Trisomy 13 affects almost everything, for the worse, in a human body – from the unfused plates in Angela’s skull that first alerted the midwife to her need for urgent medical attention, to the curled-in toes on her feet. It is so rare that even at the tertiary-care facility where she was cared for, most doctors had only heard of the condition, never seen it. When they did see it, their words were grim.

My brother-in-law still has the notebook where he tried to keep track of what the endless parade of specialists said in those first few frantic days. Early on he wrote down the phrase, “Incompatible with life.” Eleven years later, Angela is still alive.

She cannot meaningfully see or hear; she cannot walk; she cannot feed herself or bathe herself. She knows nothing of language. We can only guess what she knows or understands of her mother, her father, her grandparents, brother and sisters. Early on she would respond to voice and touch; in recent years, even as she has grown physically, she has for long seasons receded further into an already distant and unknowable world.

Which leads to this question: Is Angela flourishing?



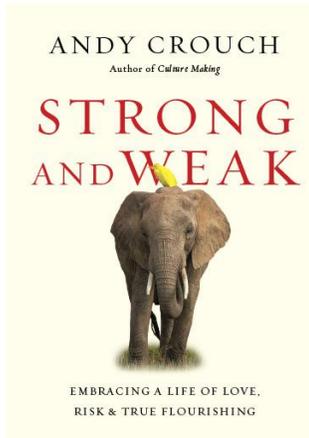
The Flourishing of the Vulnerable

If your definition of flourishing is the life held out for us by mass-affluent consumer culture, the obvious answer is that Angela is not flourishing, never has and never will. She cannot purchase her satisfactions; she cannot impress her peers; she cannot even “express herself” in the ways we think are so important for our own fulfillment.

But perhaps the question actually has things backwards. When Jesus was asked the question, “Who is my neighbor?” he told a parable that turned that question on its head, ending with the question, “Who was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” If we were to similarly turn the question of flourishing around, maybe we would be asking, “Who is helping Angela flourish?” We might be asking, “Who is flourishing because of Angela?” And even, “How can we become the kind of people among whom Angela flourishes, and who flourish with Angela in our midst?”

Flourishing is not actually the property of an individual at all, no matter how able or disabled. It describes a community. The real question of flourishing is for the community that surrounds Angela – her parents and siblings, her extended family, the skilled practitioners of medicine and education and nutrition who care for her, and in a widest sense the society and nation of which she is a citizen. The real test of every human community is how it cares for the most vulnerable, those like Angela who cannot sustain even a simulation of independence and autonomy. The question is not whether Angela, alone, is flourishing or not – the question is whether her presence in our midst leads us to flourishing, together.

– Taken from chapter two, “Flourishing”



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"This book is going to have a profound impact on our world. It's built on a clear, deep, life-changing insight that opens up vast possibilities for human flourishing. Classic, elegant and utterly illuminating."

— John Ortberg, senior pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, author of *Soul Keeping*

An Interview with Andy Crouch

Strong and Weak follows on the heels of *Playing God*. How is this book an extension of that?

Andy Crouch: The first motivation was realizing I had left something out of my book *Playing God*! Or more exactly, discovering a much more powerful way of expressing an idea that was in that book, but not especially prominent or succinctly expressed. I've actually come to believe it's among the most powerful, simple ideas I've been able to distill from my study of culture, power and the image of God over the years.

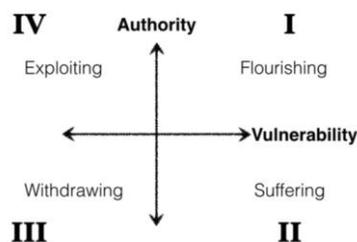
The second motivation was discovering just how helpful — at a personal, emotional and spiritual level — this key idea was to an incredible range of audiences, from seasoned organizational leaders to teenagers. (I came home one afternoon this summer to find the key idea from this book drawn on a whiteboard in our basement: my fifteen-year-old daughter had drawn it, taken a picture, and sent it by text message to a friend who was going through a hard time at school.)

The core need the book addresses is finding a way to hold together two of the most basic features of human life — authority and strength, vulnerability and weakness — to see how they *both* contribute to flourishing, and to choose the path that leads towards flourishing, for ourselves and others. It's a path that requires us to learn to be both strong and weak.

What is the main theme in *Strong and Weak*?

Andy: The core idea is that flourishing — in our personal lives, our families, our communities and our organizations — comes when people learn to live with both authority and vulnerability. Authority ("capacity for meaningful action") is not an alternative to vulnerability ("exposure to meaningful risk") — it is meant to be combined with it.

This core idea is expressed most powerfully in the 2x2 chart that is at the heart of the book:



We instinctively think these two things are somehow opposites — that to have more of one means having less of the other. And so of course, we try to move “up and to the left” —

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gaining authority and minimizing vulnerability. But this actually leads to exploitation of the world and other people. It is the move of tyrants and idolaters – people who seek to grab control, power without risk. And it leaves many other people “down and to the right” – exposed to great vulnerability with no authority.

“Authority and vulnerability are not opposites – they go together, and when they are combined, we and everyone around us flourishes.”

– Andy Crouch

The real challenge of each of our personal lives, and of our lives as leaders in communities, is to move “up and to the right” and help others do the same: to increase our authority and our vulnerability over time.

What do you want to convey to your readers?

Andy: Authority and vulnerability are not opposites – they go together, and when they are combined, we and everyone around us flourish. This is the “paradox of flourishing” – it requires weakness as well as strength.

Flourishing is not just the property of successful, healthy individuals – it’s actually a quality of communities that can provide for the most vulnerable, places where even the vulnerable are granted dignity and authority.

The heart of what we call poverty is not a lack of money – it’s the experience of vulnerability without authority.

The greatest danger of life in the affluent West is the quadrant I call “withdrawing” – backing away from both authority and vulnerability.

Leaders are people who embrace the suffering that comes with hidden vulnerability (bearing risks no one else can see, so that the community they lead can act with authority) and what I call the “descent to the dead,” the willingness to choose redemptive suffering so others can live.



Andy Crouch, author of *Strong and Weak: Embracing a Life of Love, Risk and True Flourishing*

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Learn more about Andy at andy-crouch.com.

Follow Andy on Twitter: @ahc

Andy Crouch, Award-Winning Author of *Culture Making* and *Playing God*

Andy Crouch (M.Div., Boston University School of Theology) is executive editor of *Christianity Today* and the author of books such as *Culture Making* and *Playing God*. Andy serves on the governing boards of Fuller Theological Seminary and Equitas Group, a philanthropic organization focused on ending child exploitation in Haiti and Southeast Asia. He is also a senior fellow of the International Justice Mission's IJM Institute. His writing has appeared in *Time*, *The Wall Street Journal* and several editions of *Best Christian Writing* and *Best Spiritual Writing*.

Crouch served as executive producer for the documentary films *Where Faith and Culture Meet* and *Round Trip*, as well as the multiyear project *This Is Our City*, which featured documentary video, reporting and essays about Christians seeking the flourishing of their cities. He also sits on the editorial board for *Books & Culture* and was editor-in-chief of *re:generation quarterly*. He also spent ten years as a campus minister with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Harvard University.

A classically trained musician who draws on pop, folk, rock, jazz and gospel, Crouch has led musical worship for congregations of five to twenty thousand. He lives with his family in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.