

FOREWORD BY EMILY P. FREEMAN

Author and host of *The Next Right Thing*

Searching
FOR
Certainty

FINDING GOD
IN THE
DISRUPTIONS
OF LIFE

SHELLY MILLER

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This book recounts events in the life of Shelly Miller according to the author's recollection and from the author's perspective. While all the stories are true, some dialogue and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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For my children,
Murielle and Harrison.
May the certainty of God's love
be your constant companion.

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FOREWORD

YOU DECIDE TO buy a certain kind of car, and suddenly you see it everywhere. A friend recommends an obscure movie to you, and by the end of the week, three more people have mentioned it. You find out you're having a baby and now you're surrounded by pregnant women in every shopping aisle, church classroom, and train station. It's not just you, and it is a real thing. So real, in fact, that there are actual names for it. Known as Blue Car syndrome, or the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, this is when we hear or experience something and suddenly it seems to appear everywhere. It's also called *frequency illusion*, which, of course, implies these things are not, in actuality, happening or appearing more often than normal, but because they have been brought to your attention, your brain notices them more often.

For the last four years, I've been paying close attention to what happens around me and within me when I have a decision to make. Once my brain was tuned in to this, I saw the impact of unmade decisions everywhere I looked. I noticed how unmade decisions hold a lot of power, and most of us fall into one of two categories: decisive or indecisive. For the decisive ones among us, unmade decisions are not allowed to linger. They demand attention and are quickly given direction. But not everyone makes decisions swiftly.

For the rest of us, unmade decisions often lead to chronic hesitation and a long process of research, consideration, and even procrastination until we get assurance that we're headed in the right direction. It doesn't matter if the decision is a small one, like which color to paint the kitchen, or a larger one, like which job offer to accept. We are afraid to choose wrong, overwhelmed by the number of options, and ultimately unsure we have what it takes to hear God's voice. The unmade decision becomes our highest priority and we begin to look everywhere for clues to an answer. To sum it up, we are *searching for certainty*.

In my continued fascination with the decision-making process, one thing I've noticed is how God seems less concerned with the decisions we make and more concerned with the way we make decisions. The focus is less on what we do and more on *who we are*. And that is one of the many reasons I've fallen in love with this book. It reads as an anthem for the chronically hesitant among us, gently guiding us away from the belief that this life is up to us, inviting us instead to enter into the larger story of God. Through sharing her personal story and her honest faith, Shelly Miller shows us God's heart toward us when we have questions, objections, and doubt. Yes, we may be walking in the dark, but God is with us. Yes, we may be carrying questions, but God sees us. Yes, we may not know what comes next, but the Lord is near. And maybe we need this message now more than ever before.

On December 31, 2019, my husband and I rang in the New Year with a few friends, our kids, a toast, some laughter, and snacks shared around our scuffed-up kitchen table. The simplicity of those moments stands in stark contrast to the complexity of what the world has had to face in 2020. We didn't know as we crossed the invisible threshold into a new decade that we had just welcomed in the year that would perhaps become the most uncertain the modern world has yet to see, forced to navigate the impact of a global pandemic. It's fair to say if we weren't familiar with uncertainty before, this year changed that. It may

not be what we expected and certainly not what we wanted, but nevertheless, here we are, a global community, facing the most uncertain days of our generation.

In these pages, Shelly's words read like those from a woman who could see the future. How did she know we would need this book at this exact time in history? How could her personal story so parallel our communal one? How could her words be so perfectly timed, poured together in a recipe of hope for such a time as this? Of course, Shelly didn't know, but our friend Jesus knew, and he offers us comfort through the words of his daughter. I've never been more grateful for the timing of a book. As Shelly's story unfolds, watch her *become someone* not in spite of uncertainty but perhaps because of it. And as we bear witness to her becoming, may it be so in us as well.

Emily P. Freeman, author of *The Next Right Thing*

“Our hunger is the exile’s hunger, but it is also the first step in our homecoming. We hunger, and in doing so learn the shape of our emptiness is the world’s great emptiness in or to prepare room for God’s presence. We imagine we are cultivating good or friendship or beauty. But we are, in all of these ways, cultivating God’s glory in our midst.”

—Christie Purifoy, *Roots and Sky*



ONE

Reframing Uncertainty

It flames from within,
unseen yet never dims

In wind, storm, or gale
it flickers with your exhale

So close, my Father's breath,
so intimate, his warmth

To live is to breathe shining

MAKE A WISH! It's what every child hears as they inhale before blowing out flaming candles on a birthday cake, marking another year. I wished my life were different almost every day of my childhood. A yellowing picture from a sparse collection of childhood photos hangs above my writing desk, a reminder that my life began clouded by uncertainty. In celebration of my third birthday, I'm bent over a white frosted cake embellished with flaming candles, one pink, one blue, and one of an indiscernible color. The photo illustrates an ephemeral frame of my story, lived

but not remembered, and often retold by relatives as *the year Shelly didn't smile*. My third year of stoic quietness accompanies a hunger strike coinciding with my parents' decision to end their short union. Age and experience aren't requirements for the soul to know something is awry, slanting the natural order of things. Searching for certainty is foundational to our DNA.

Of English descent, Dad and I share the thin bridge of our nose becoming a bright shade of pink when we stand in the sunny outdoors longer than fifteen minutes. Even with belts around our waists, we each maintain the habit of pulling up our pants due to small hips. His wavy brown hair and thin lips are my inheritance, but the twinkle in those marble blues when he smiles, well, those eyes set him apart as my grandfather's son. Being Dave's daughter sounds magical when I hear other people say it out loud.

Dad was twenty-four, on the verge of completing his junior year of law school, when he pursued my mother, an attractive reservation agent with Trans World Airlines (TWA), who preferred wearing Saks Fifth Avenue from head to toe. A few months into their relationship, he received the untimely news of her suspected pregnancy. One academic year away from receiving a diploma, embarking upon a career and claiming independence, the last thing he envisioned was becoming a husband and a parent. But raised as a staunch Catholic by two devout parents, he followed conviction over scruples, choosing marriage at the semester break to give my life legitimacy. But the pregnancy was kept a secret from both sides of the family until I entered the world on the ninth of August at St. Joseph Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri. Once the math was calculated by unsuspecting relatives, my parents' secret was revealed and the weight of judgment was released onto Dad's shoulders. He would never practice law, but the secret he defended was the single case that haunted him for rest of his life. Did he do the right thing? Did he plead the case well before the court of disapproving witnesses? What could he have done differently?

From their fractured beginning, the marriage between my mother and father was anything but good. *Not enough* was the mantra heard repeatedly, especially when it came to money. Searching for the certainty of her happiness, Dad borrowed money from his parsimonious father for a down payment on a newly constructed condo, hoping to create some security in his marriage. They moved in and settled down, but a short time later, upon arriving home from a business trip in Georgia, he opened the door to an empty house. The only evidence of their union left behind was a framed picture of his bride on their wedding day, hanging on a blank wall. Mom filed for divorce and Dad resumed living with his parents.

During their separation, home for me was with Dad. We developed a Wednesday rhythm of picking up carryout at a local fast-food restaurant, enjoying time together while Grandma and Grandpa were out on a routine dinner date. Decades later, when Dad informs me that my favorite childhood meal was a cheeseburger, mashed potatoes, and milk shake, those seemingly random details become a revelation, bringing new insight to old cravings: frequenting the Dairy Queen drive-thru for dip cones while pregnant with my firstborn, Murielle, and the McDonald's drive-thru for cheeseburgers during the nine months I carried my son, Harrison. Who you are at the core arises as revelation amid major markers shaping your life.

Divorce in the 1960s was an era when courts granted full custody more often to women. By the time I blew the candles out on that frosted homemade cake in the photograph, my parents' divorce was final and home transitioned to living with Mom. As stipulated by the court, time with Dad was limited to weekends. Our Wednesday dinner dates ended, and a short time later, I declared a hunger strike.

To create some stability again, my parents agreed that I should return to the security of my grandparents' house, living temporarily in the company of Dad. But I still refused to eat anything. In desperation, Dad drove back to the little hamburger joint,

ordered a milk shake, carried it home, placed the sweet, creamy drink in front of me, and much to his delight, watched the contents slowly disappear. For two weeks, daily sustenance came in the form of a milk shake slurped through a straw. Then one evening, he departed from the safety of the familiar, bringing home an order of mashed potatoes to accompany my liquid diet. “I remember being so excited to tell my parents about your eating the potatoes when they got home,” Dad writes to me in an email.

For several weeks, mashed potatoes and milk shakes were manna provided by my father until slowly, steadily, I began departing from the familiar to try new food. Dad delivers the good report to Mom and I return to her house the next day. One week later, she calls with more dire news: I am refusing to eat again. And Dad starts the process all over again.

Before my father filled in the cracks of my foundations, I memorized that old photograph of myself and discerned a different narrative based on my adult expression at three years of life: Unhappy and unloved, I was an unwanted intrusion into my parents’ lives. It wasn’t until I boldly asked, decades later, about the details of how my life began that I gained understanding and empathy. When I look at that picture now, my sober expression translates as discernment and self-protection with a large dose of stubbornness. Early on, life was out of sorts, and I chose to turn inward as a result of worry, a first response to uncertainty. With self-awareness that comes by way of maturity and life experiences, I translate my refusal to smile as *I’m not going to give you what you want* (a smile for the photo) *if I can’t trust you to give me what I need* (security). You could say I’ve been searching for the certainty of proof that I am worthy of love ever since I blew the candles out on that cake.

And aren’t we all on a similar pilgrimage—looking for proof that we are worthy of love and belonging when the circumstances of life make us feel like exiles? When a career is replaced by a bot, a church splits due to irreconcilable differences over theology, a

friendship dissolves in betrayal, and livelihood is compromised by a health diagnosis, self-protection is our knee-jerk reaction. It is human nature to turn inward, self-reflect, and assess current uncertainty through the lens of our circumstances. But God requires something different from us. Look up and make eye contact with him amid the disruptions of life.

Exiled from his own people, perhaps Moses was looking for proof that he was worthy of love and belonging too, as he watched an Egyptian beat up a Hebrew, a man who could've been his distant relative. What provoked him to watch his people endure the ravages of hard labor? What question might he have been trying to answer? What false narrative had he made into truth? Moses chose murder over love. How might his actions been different had he chosen to look up rather than out?

Because God was watching the Hebrews too. But his response was compassion and liberation, freedom from captivity. Ironically, God chose Moses to lead his own people into freedom, a man prone toward self-reliance rather than relying on God. They watched. Both Moses and God were watching the same people from different perspectives. The Egyptians could've been wiped out in a breath, but God offered the choice of response first. What are you watching? How are you making assessments of the world? How might looking up reorient your perspective back to hope?

Not enough was the cry of the Israelites in response to the fear of uncertainty threaded throughout the Exodus story. *I am not enough* was Moses' knee-jerk reaction to God's request from a burning bush to lead the Israelites out of captivity. *Not enough* is ultimately our deepest fear when we encounter the wilderness of the unknown as we journey through life. Maybe right now, as you hold this book in your hands, you fear that you won't

Early on, life was out of sorts, and I chose to turn *inward* as a result of worry, a first response to *uncertainty*.

have enough time, food, money, influence, approval, friendships, support—you fill in the blank. What is missing in your life that God is *not enough* for you? What situations are you attempting to solve with self-reliance instead of reliance on God?

The unknown scares me. Uncertainty creates resistance. I like to visualize the lay of the land before taking a leap into new territory. And if all is unfamiliar and I don't have a clue, I tend to self-protect and turn inward. Protect the familiar like it's my job and then wrestle through perfectionism until I finally surrender to risk.

When impossible situations interrupt the hopeful future we envision, we are prone to revert to the familiar as comfort, even when we know the familiar might not be God's best for us. A glass of wine to numb stress, quick social media scrolls to feel less alone, a shopping spree to perk up sadness, binge-watching Netflix as an escape from disappointment, the taste of a chocolate milk shake to fill the deep void of grief.

Three days after God provides a miracle in parting the Red Sea, ushering the Israelites into safety, that miracle in moments of desperation becomes a faded memento forgotten once stomachs begin growling. In the desert, it was as if the whole community had amnesia when their hunger was unsatiated. "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exodus 16:3).

It is scary to open one's self to the dark of the divine, giving up control that brings an illusion of safety with it. Mystery can make you hesitant to hope, decidedly prone toward doubt, and more anxious for preferred outcomes. *Who am I? Why me? Why now?* Those were the first questions Moses asked when God tasked him with leading the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom. And they are the same questions that haunt us when uncertainty flares like a burning bush on the sidewalks of suburban life.

ACCORDING TO THE World Health Organization, one in thirteen globally suffers from anxiety. In the United States, one in five adults have a mental health condition. That's over forty million Americans; more than the populations of New York and Florida combined. Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide. Almost 75 percent of people with mental disorders remain untreated in developing countries, with almost one million people taking their lives each year. Studies also reveal that loneliness has become an epidemic affecting over half the population in the United States. Those numbers are staggering.¹

In the *Independent*, Alex Williams writes, "Anxiety is starting to seem like a sociological condition, too: a shared cultural experience that feeds on alarmist CNN graphics and metastasizes through social media.

"As depression was to the 1990s . . . so it seems we have entered a new Age of Anxiety. Monitoring our heart rates. Swiping ceaselessly at our iPhones. Filling meditation studios in an effort to calm our racing thoughts. Consider the fidget spinner: endlessly whirring between the fingertips of Generation Alpha, annoying teachers and baffling parents."²

Wars, pandemics, recessions, technological changes, work/life alterations—all contribute to a massive cultural transition taking place around the globe. Whom can I trust? Where do I belong? What will my future hold? Does anyone truly care about me? How can I find peace amid transition? These are the questions that haunt all of us in today's busy world. And they were the same questions heard from the Israelites as they wandered through the desert with Moses thousands of years ago.

Transitioning from the familiarity of captivity to the unknowns of the desert, the exiles were unsure if God was going to make good on his promises. Are we loved or are we damned? Will the Promised Land be worth the long, arduous journey rife with uncertainty? Or will adversity and hardship divert the Israelites from the good God has planned for them? Spoiler

alert: There *is* a happy ending. But happy endings don't often come without navigating times of uncertainty first.

Read the story of the Exodus and you may be skeptical about God's promises still being relevant for you today. Will adversity that comes by way of racism, sexism, violence, terrorism, plagues, and politics keep us from the good God has planned in the future? Can you trust that where God is leading you is good when evidence of good is unseen in your current situation? Can you believe that God is trustworthy? Will entering your unique Promised Land be worth a bit of wandering through the wilderness first? Maybe your response to God is this: *I'm not going to give you what you want if you can't give me what I need.*

What I didn't know at three years old but have discovered through maturity is this: Uncertainty provides rescue from being stuck in the familiar ways of life that keep us from moving forward into the purposes of God. Wandering into the wilderness of the unknown is God's divine reorientation, from what we know in the present to what God knows about the future. That's why God chose manna to satisfy the appetite of the Israelites for forty years instead of milk shakes and cheeseburgers. "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will *test them and see whether they will follow my instructions*" (Exodus 16:4, emphasis added).

MANNA FROM GOD doesn't always look like mashed potatoes, chocolate milk shakes, a job title, a brand-new condo, numbers of zeros on your paycheck, or high-thread-count sheets. In Hebrew, *manna* is defined as *What is it?* Because what sustains and causes growth doesn't often come by way of rational concrete answers, but in asking the right question, *What is it?* What is it that you desire from my life? What is it that you see within me that I am remiss to see within myself? What good might you

accomplish through my uncertainty? And the current uncertainty in the world?

In our current culture of excess and overstimulation, we need manna from the hand of our Father, nothing more and nothing less. “The people of Israel went to work and started gathering, some more, some less, but when they measured out what they had gathered, those who gathered more had no extra and those who gathered less weren’t short—each person had gathered as much as was needed” (Exodus 16:17–18 *The Message*). If you are asking, *What is it?*—What is this curious, unexplainable circumstance that has arrived unexpectedly in my life?—God is asking, “Do you believe that what I will provide is *enough* to sustain and shelter you?”

That childhood photo hanging above my writing desk is backlit by a window of afternoon sun illuminating my short brown curls and the white sailor collar on a blue dress. Like my brief stint with married parents, nothing about the photo is memorable or familiar—the chair I’m kneeling on, the wooden table that holds my birthday cake, the sheer glow of curtains banking the sides of the open window in the background, or the faded wooden fence beyond, outside the open door. I’m three years old, leaning over a cake, paradoxically with determination not to smile, preparing to cast a wish upon my future.

Foundations bring shape to our lives, but they don’t define who we are at the core. Capturing story through photography is a spiritual practice in seeing life differently when I am prone to find comfort in familiarity. God is not slow to respond; we are slow to come around to being loved by him. Why do you think it took the Israelites forty years to reach the Promised Land when the journey could’ve been made in a few weeks?

The Exodus story provides a mirror and a map for navigating uncertainty for us. Think of me as your guide through the wilderness with a camera strapped over my shoulder, framing details in the following pages.

Reframe uncertainty through the lens of the certainty of God's love, and interpret current events from the perspective of promise that is never revoked. What are the images of life you are holding on to that create false narratives? What is God saying that the headlines aren't declaring? What is anxiety communicating that the Comforter is not responding to?

There is not another soul in the world who can do what you do in the unique way you do it. You are gifted with talents that God created unlike any other talent in the world. You can be compared to no one because never has your frame been thought of the same way by any two people. There is no need to compete or elbow your way into a room because your very essence speaks of God's glory. And his presence in you is a force to be reckoned with in this uncertain world. He can answer all your unknowns in a blink but he loves you by giving you a choice of response. If you are allowing uncertainty in the world to determine how useful you are to God, maybe it's time to rethink who and what is informing your value and worth.

IN THE EARLY days, while living at my grandparents' home under the care of my father, I grew into anticipating Saturday mornings as comfort. That day in the week provided the luxury of being nestled into the crook of Dad's arm under the warmth of blankets—talking, laughing, bouncing on the mattress, and playing imaginary games. But the divorce came with new rhythms, and that comfort was no longer available to me. As the days, weeks, months, and years passed, I saw less and less of Dad. His absence translated as *I'm not enough*; I assumed I wasn't worth the effort. After all, being a husband and a father wasn't what he envisioned for his life in that season. But I was wrong.

When I sent Dad the old photograph of myself bending over the frosted birthday cake, requesting the back story about the sober expression written on my face, he responded graciously in

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the spirit of generosity. Risking rejection, Dad reveals the truth, reframing the uncertain season of our lives with the redemption that time and distance create. “I truly wanted to have you live with me, but things got very difficult between my parents, your mother, and myself. I could see you were being pulled in many different directions, which was causing you to be confused and hurt. I thought it best to step back and not be the father to you I wanted to be. I thought releasing you would be for the best.”

My father’s absence ameliorates into unselfish sacrifice with the revelation of truth captured in his vulnerability. I reply to Dad’s email: “As I’ve pondered what you wrote, I just want you to know that I don’t hold anything against you at all. I realize that you were in a terribly difficult place when I was a child, and in what I can imagine was a lot of emotional pain. I’m just sad that we missed out on having a normal father/daughter relationship. Growing up, I often translated your emotional distance as my not being wanted or loved, but knowing that the decision you made was out of love and for my good brings a lot more clarity and understanding to why things were as they were. Please don’t allow the past to have a hold on you now. God has been faithful to redeem what happened for our good. I’m grateful you were willing to revisit the past knowing it was painful, difficult, and so long ago.”

I learn it wasn’t just becoming a father and supporting a new wife that kept my father from realizing a law degree from years of study. A priest acting as professor and later, assistant dean of the school blocked him from completing the remaining three hours he had left to finish the program. Dad never wanted to practice law in the classic sense, but what he gleaned from those years served a long, successful business career.

We are never too old, experienced, or responsible to need the certainty of our heavenly Father’s love. And never too old, experienced, or responsible to misinterpret silence from God during seasons of uncertainty as unloving. Silence rings as wisdom with the luxury of time and distance. Reframing uncertainty through

the lens of being deeply loved and fully known changes the way we translate adversity in beginnings and what I would come to define as a tumultuous middle.

Practice REFRAMING UNCERTAINTY
THROUGH THE LENS OF BEING KNOWN

What is the first memory you have of uncertainty in your life?

How did you respond?

With the perspective of time, what is that memory saying to you now?

How might you respond to uncertainty differently right now?

What narrative would you change about your story if you were given the freedom to rewrite an uncertain chapter with the certainty of God's love?

Name a goal you would like to reach by the time you finish the last chapter of this book.

Ask God to reveal to you how redemption looks from his perspective.

