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The End of an Era

Indonesia, August 27, 1883

First, the blast sent sound waves that ripped across the face of the earth. Then, a volcanic explosion, ten thousand times more powerful than the atomic bomb, tore apart the Indonesian island of Krakatoa. People heard the sound as far away as Saigon, Bangkok, Manila, and Perth. As the sky turned red and rained rock, churchgoers on nearby islands shuddered, fearing it was the end of days.

The blast killed over thirty-six thousand people, destroying more than three-quarters of the island. The entire planet experienced a raft of environmental effects. Dramatic sunsets and strange phenomena in the sky took place for months. Fire brigades were called as far away as North America. The sky itself looked as if it was on fire.

As news of the explosion ricocheted across the planet, the global public was fascinated. The world was in the grip of the Industrial Revolution, and the rapid growth of technology had elevated belief in human power and potential. For the first time in history, it felt as if nature was tamed. However, the scale of the eruption on Krakatoa awed the world. The modern age again became frightened, reminded of the limits of human ability and the terrifying potency

of nature. In an instant, the island of Krakatoa was changed.

For many of us, that is what the world feels like now. The pandemic, cultural change, political polarization, and technological disruption have rapidly altered the world we live in at a breakneck speed. Most understand that the world has changed. However, the sheer rate of change has left many disoriented. We, too, have been left with a sense of the potent chaos in the world. We are not as in control as we thought. We are left with questions of how to lead at such a time when the rules seem to have changed.

REDUCED TO A CHAOTIC FORMLESS STATE

Seven weeks after Krakatoa had burst apart, a Dutch colonial engineer and a small team ventured on the island. Landing, they found the shape and form of the island rearranged. Much of what once was solid had slipped into the sea. Two of its mountain peaks had vanished entirely. Yet the smaller part of the island had grown. The very shape of Krakatoa had been refashioned, birthing a new terrain. Before the eruption, Krakatoa was a thick blanket of trees and plants, which teemed with animals and insects. Yet now, all animal and plant life was vanquished. Its surface turned into a chaotic mess of volcanic rock and ash. The island lay in an in-between state. Not completely obliterated, yet neither able to bear life. This lifeless ground sat in the sea, like the formless land of Genesis 1.

In the biblical account of creation, we encounter unformed earth in its chaotic form. Pregnant with the potential of creation, the Spirit hovered over the waters. The formless earth we encounter in Genesis 1 exists in an in-between state, waiting for birth seeded by the divine hand.

The island of Krakatoa also waited in a formless state. The

island existed in a confusing and jarring in-between form. When reframed, the phase that feels like destruction, mayhem, and death is the moment just before rebirth.

We are moving into our in-between moment, in which the usual rules do not apply. The markers and measurements that we use to find a sense of place and direction do not operate in this phase. This creates anxiety.

Yet we will also discover that in-between moments are filled with potential. They are the moments over which the Spirit of God hovers, waiting to bring new creation. Gray zones are filled with pressure and chaos, yet they are where God does something exceptional inside His people, calling leaders to Himself in a new and more profound way.

First, though, we must orient ourselves at this moment. We need a lay of the land. Once we understand how the world has changed, we can begin to see how God does new and transforming things in transitional moments like this.

WE HAVE MOVED INTO A GRAY ZONE

We are in a time of significant and rapid worldwide change. Political scientist Randall Schweller notes that “the world is undergoing transformation. . . . a chaotic period where most anything can happen and little can be predicted; where yesterday’s rule takers become tomorrow’s rule makers, but no one follows rules anymore; where competing global visions collide with each other; where remnants of the past, present, and future coexist simultaneously.”¹ The lightning change was happening in politics, technology, culture, and the global order, hinting at a new and different future.

These changes only seemed to accelerate with the arrival of

the COVID-19 virus. “This virus, like many before it, is just such a history-accelerating crisis,”² note journalists John Micklethwait and Adrian Woolridge, illuminating the way that pandemics launch us into new epochs. Yet as the third decade of the twenty-first century begins, we find ourselves in an unnerving transitory state—the gray zone.

KEY IDEA: *We have not entered a new era; instead, we have entered an in-between phase, a gray zone.*

WE ARE LIVING IN A GRAY ZONE

Confusion is the dominant sense we experience during transitional moments of rapid change. Therefore, it is vital to understand where we are and what is going on.

We need a new interpretive framework to understand the abnormal conditions that are emerging in the world. The framework I would like to offer to help us understand this moment is simple. The world is moving into a transitional phase—a gray zone.

A gray zone is confusing and contradictory, filled with change and conflict. Everything seems to be up in the air.

I have borrowed the term *gray zone* from the study of twenty-first-century warfare. Traditionally, there were clear definitions of what war was, when it started and ended. It was clear who was fighting and what rules of combat were. However, it is becoming less apparent in the twenty-first century when war has begun and when it ends.

When mysterious soldiers in unmarked green uniforms turned up in the Ukrainian region of Crimea in 2014, no one knew if this

was a local insurgency, an invasion from Russia, or something new. It was the start of a new conflict, yet no one could tell exactly when the war began. This shows how the boundaries between war and peace are blurring. Military strategists now differentiate between kinetic war—essentially shooting and blowing up the enemy—and other forms of war such as cyber, information, legal, criminal, psychological, and economic.

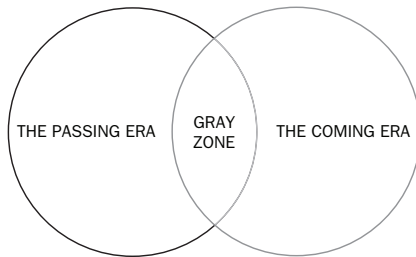
Understanding this background helps us understand why gray zones are confusing places. The term *gray zone* has a broader application than just as a military term. Many Christian leaders—who have been formed by procedure, clear boundaries, and sharp definitions—find this moment challenging to comprehend and operate within.

GRAY ZONES EXIST IN THE OVERLAP OF TWO ERAS

Historians arrange passages of time into eras. Eras traditionally are shaped around the rule of an empire or ruling class, which establishes an overarching big story or narrative. Big stories are created and communicated primarily by those in power to justify their rule. Eras also contain a defined set of rules and promoted patterns of life. History shows us that an era tends to be dominated by influential individuals who shape its thinking, key events that determine its direction, movements that embody its longings, and artists who capture its mood.

KEY IDEA: *Gray zones exist in the overlap of two eras. They contain the influence of both the passing and forming era; this makes gray zones confusing and contradictory.*

However, there are moments when ages overlap and eras mingle in a hybrid transitional moment. Thus, gray zones contain the influence of more than one era. Historian Peter Gay captures this in describing the interwar years of his childhood in Germany, which was marked by a mood that “was both old and new. The striking mixture of cynicism and confidence, the search for novelty and for roots.”³ For people living through the years in between the world wars, it seemed to many like a new beginning. To others, it felt like the end of an era. Thus, gray zones are bridges in between eras.



So how do we know when we are in a gray zone or living through an era? Let's dig deeper.

GRAY ZONES CONTAIN AN INTENSIFICATION OF THE PASSING ERA

Gray zones exist in the overlap between the passing era and the era to come. One can be fooled that the old era is still dominant. Often as eras pass, their traits intensify. We have seen this dynamic at play during the pandemic. The effect of lockdowns created a radical break with routine. No longer could we look away from the realities of the era we had been living in. As the British novelist James Meeks reflected on the lockdowns, “When you aren’t going anywhere, the danger is that you might start seeing the way things are going.”⁴

Without the daily distractions and routine of our lives, the concerning trajectory of the era we lived in became clearer. The crises under the surface became impossible to ignore.

As Dani Rodrik writes, “The crisis seems to have thrown the dominant characteristics of each country’s politics into sharper relief. Countries have in effect become exaggerated versions of themselves.” The pandemic was serving to “intensify and entrench already-existing trends.”⁵ In nations across the world, a range of social issues that had been simmering under the surface burst forth—bringing forward a raft of issues such as racism, religious tensions, sexism, and the environment. The problems of the era were intensifying at the precise moment that the era was passing.

GRAY ZONES CONTAIN THE TRAITS OF THE COMING ERA

At the same time, however, we could also see a new world being born. For most of the last decade, a series of impending shifts have been visible on the horizon—trends that will have a far-reaching impact on our world. The globe, in the words of Richard Robb, James Manyika, and Jonathan Woetzel, stands

poised at a set of historical, technological, economic, political, and social inflection points. The transformation we’re living through has sometimes been likened to the Industrial Revolution. In fact, the Industrial Revolution pales in comparison to today’s convulsions, because the shifts today are happening much faster and on a much bigger scale. Because they are so interlinked—urbanization and consumption, technology and competition, ageing and labor—and because they amplify one

another, the changes are harder to anticipate and more powerful in their impact. And they challenge our imaginations as much as they do our competencies and skills.⁶

One of the impacts of the global pandemic was to accelerate us toward that horizon and those inflection points. The pandemic didn't change the world. It was a signal of the change already happening in the world. British historian Adam Tooze described the pandemic as "a way station on an ascending curve of radical change,"⁷ noting that "for better or worse there is no escaping the fact that 'big things' are going to happen. The continuation of the status quo is the one option we do not have."⁸ The world was already a change-rich environment; the pandemic was a harbinger that the continual and accelerating change was here to stay.

Indian novelist Arundhati Roy observed that COVID-19, like all pandemics, operated as a bridge between eras, a portal between the world we have lived in and a new world yet to be imagined.⁹ As a result, our movement became more local. Yet, at the same time,

we became more digital. With the rise of new technologies from rapidly developed vaccines to the mainstream adoption of disruptive innovations such as cryptocurrencies and the normalization of remote work, the future seemed much closer.

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A futuristic mood emerged during the pandemic. Cryptocurrencies became mainstream. Viral videos showcased rapid advancements in robotics. The Pentagon began reporting on encounters with UFOs. Economist Tyler Cowen remarked, "I have been reading science fiction for half a century, having spent my childhood consuming it in various forms. Now, for the first time in my life, I feel like I am living in a science fiction

serial.”¹⁰ It’s clear that a new era is being born. Its contours are unclear, yet its influence is still palpable. This is what it feels like to live in a gray zone.

KEY IDEA: *The gray zone will be the context in which you will live and lead. We must understand it and learn to flourish within it.*

We may not know without hindsight when the gray zone will end, yet it is the environment in which we are called to lead. To live out the kingdom of God. For those who have found themselves overrun by the sheer pace of change over the last five years, who anxiously try to find their bearings in this time—you are not alone. Gray zones are challenging places that operate under different rules. However, we follow an unchanging God, who is advancing His kingdom in this gray zone moment.

As we will discover next, gray zones are precisely the kinds of places that God seeds with renewal and rebirth.

RECAP: THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS

- We have not entered a new era; instead, we have entered an in-between phase, a gray zone.
- Gray zones exist in the overlap of two eras. They contain the influence of both the passing and forming era; this makes gray zones confusing and contradictory.
- The gray zone will be the context in which you will live and lead. We must understand it and learn to flourish within it.

Rebirth

Three years after the initial visit to Krakatoa, another expedition landed upon the island. Instead of burnt, barren ground, the landing party discovered that life had again taken hold in this most unlikely of places. Mosses, algae, flowering plants, and even species of fern flourished. How had these plants managed to grow in such a barren and dead environment? Tiny seeds carried by the wind or birds had triggered a miraculous renewal of life upon the devastated island. Seeds beget seeds. Seeds turn into fruit. Fruit turns into seeds, and multiplication occurs.

A year later, another expedition arriving on the island discovered that “there had been . . . rampant growth. There were now dense fields of grasses, so tall that a man could hide himself,”¹ writes Simon Winchester. Destruction had paradoxically led to a rebirth of life. Today the island is the repository of an ecosystem of thousands of plants and dense forests. It is home to hundreds of animal species.

What looked like destruction was the phase before germination. The devastation created a blank page upon which a new story could be told.

What looked like destruction was the phase before germination. The devastation created a blank page upon which a new story

could be told. The gray zone became the seedbed of renewal. Krakatoa reminds us that what may look like decline, loss, or even obliteration can be revival's launching pad. For such renewal to occur, all it takes is a single seed.

THE WORLD IS SEEDED WITH RENEWAL

The metaphor of seeds helps us understand how God transports His dream of redemption for the world. His Word creates new life, renewing and reviving. At the fall, Adam and Eve rejected God's good order in the world. Instead, they chose a new path of sin. As a result, death and destruction rushed into the world, warping and wounding the good creation that God had wrought from chaos. Instead of tearing up His plans and annihilating His handiwork, God chose the path of redemption. God initiated a project of renewal that would undo the pattern of death and chaos in the world.

To renew is to make new, to bring back to life. We see this most clearly as Jesus—God in human form—took death and sin upon Himself on a Roman cross. For three days, the Son of Man, like a seed, lay in the cold ground. Yet on the third day, Jesus rose. The power of resurrection was let loose in the world. A new spiritual era was born. Salvation was now available to all who fell at the feet of the risen King. Those who decided to follow Him would become more like Him. Renewal has been released in the world, and the powers of darkness cannot stop it. Even in our gray zone moment, God is moving history toward His ends. For those with eyes to see, the seeds of renewal are everywhere.

KEY IDEA: *When viewed through a biblical lens, gray zones are moments that often precede renewal and rebirth.*

Seeds of Renewal in the Church

There are seeds of renewal in the church. There is a hunger for renewal, revival, and awakening brewing among God's people. For a period, it was possible to bury one's head in the sand and ignore the challenges of secularism and post-Christianity. Now, however, the decline and stagnation are stark. It is undeniable that the surrounding culture can warp churches and believers. We feel the gap between the vision of the church we encounter in Scripture and the reality on the ground. This gives rise to a deep desire for God's church to be refreshed, empowered, and renewed.

There is a longing among God's people to see His church live out its potential. This hunger for renewal is happening across denominations. This longing is global. Across the world, from Scandinavia to South America, there are thousands who see the culture changing rapidly and who pine to see the presence of God fall in new ways to revive His church.

Seeds of Renewal in Us

Accompanying the hunger for God to revive His church, many believers today also hunger for personal renewal. They long for a deeper walk with God. They desire a more transformative faith. There is a deep sense that millions have fallen into the contemporary pattern of life, one of continual consumption, ever-present anxiety, and self-focus—an unsustainable pattern. Many are realizing that what they long for can only be satisfied by the eternal God. Be assured that seeds are being laid for a great renewal of our personal faith.

Seeds of Renewal in Society

There is also a growing international hunger for a renewal of society. Over the last decade, we have seen protest movements across the

world call for reformations of society. Many issues have come to the fore, such as economic inequality, corruption, environmentalism, racism, sexism, and farmers' rights. These issues have sparked massive movements in nations across the world, both online and

God distributes the seeds of renewal via leaders who carry the seed of renewal.

in the streets. Emerging technologies are making it easier for such movements to grow and organize. They shine a brighter light on injustices and corruption. It is now harder for governments, corporations, and institutions to maintain their public face without scrutiny.

This dynamic is leading to a global crystallization of discontent. Hence, a growing and now ever-present hunger for a resounding renewal of society.

KEY IDEA: *God has seeded the world with renewal. God uses leaders to seed His plans in the world.*

GRAY ZONES ARE SEEDBEDS

God has seeded gray zones with the potential for renewal. Life was returned to Krakatoa in the form of seeds carried to Krakatoa via ocean currents, gusts of wind, and birds. In the same way, God distributes the seeds of renewal via leaders who carry the seed of renewal. Leaders who, by stepping into the process of renewal, find themselves renewed. A renewed leader is a leader who then leads others into renewal. These leaders become carriers of the seed of renewal, embodying the next season God is birthing among His people.

Yet often, such leaders are unaware of how God works, untuned to His processes. As a result, many such leaders lie dormant, hidden in the gray zone, waiting to be activated.

Yes, there are times when it appears as if the darkness is winning. When the direction of culture, the circumstances of our lives, the poverty of spiritual life among God's people seems tilted toward difficulty, decline, and even death rather than renewal. This is particularly true during our gray zone moment. The church seems divided, the culture unraveling, and the world reeling toward chaos. Yet, at moments like ours, we must remember that God has seeded the world with His dream of renewal. The pattern of Scripture is that this dream is planted within leaders.

KEY IDEA: *God seeds leaders with His dream of renewal.*

We see this pattern throughout Scripture and church history. For even in the seemingly darkest and most confusing times, God still brings forth a new cohort of leaders—ordinary people with an extraordinary role to play as carriers of His seed of renewal. Through surrendering to God's will, they discover and then advance His pattern of renewal in the world. Yet, for these seeds to be activated, leaders must step into a process of growth. As we will discover, the life cycle of seeds is a reeducation into how the world works.

RECAP: THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS

- When viewed through a biblical lens, gray zones often precede renewal and rebirth.
- God has seeded the world with renewal. God uses leaders to seed His plans in the world.
- God seeds leaders with His dream of renewal.