

PRAISE FOR *THIS IS AWKWARD*

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***THIS IS  
AWKWARD***



# ***THIS IS AWKWARD***

How Life's Uncomfortable Moments Open  
the Door to Intimacy and Connection

**Sammy Rhodes**



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BOOKS

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*To my wife, Alyssa. Thank you for seeing all of my awkward and loving me. Also, I'm sorry about that time I cried and yelled at you for not reading my blogs.*



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# ***INTRODUCTION***

*Vulnerability Is Hard, but Grace Is True, So Let's Make Some Awkward*

I've always considered myself an awkward person. I can't tell you the first time I had this realization. It probably was a social situation that involved small talk. If I could have any superpower, it would be the ability to do small talk well, because anyone who does it well is a superhero as far as I'm concerned. I'm more like the Aquaman of small talk: people don't remember much about me except that I'm weird.

The feeling that I was awkward only increased when I got into ministry, a job that requires a good amount of social skills. When I first arrived at the University of South Carolina to take the position of RUF Campus Minister, the students in our ministry had two standing weekly traditions that made my awkwardness shine. One was called "stump the chump," where a group of six to eight students

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would meet me for lunch on campus so they could ask any burning questions that they had.

The other was sand volleyball. The game is straightforward enough, except that you've never seen me play sand volleyball. John Updike wrote, "Looking foolish does the spirit good."<sup>1</sup> I think God gave us sand volleyball for that very reason. Some of us are less like Goose and Maverick in *Top Gun* and more like the guys in the control center we never got to see play sand volleyball because it would have been too painful to watch.

I learned a lot about my awkwardness that first year at the university. I also learned that it's objectively weird to sit Indian style next to a sand volleyball court and just watch, especially when you have a mustache.

One of the perks of being awkward is that because people generally don't love being around you, you have plenty of time to think and write. This book is living proof. I hope that it's proof, too, that our awkward moments matter.

I can think of so many reasons I shouldn't write this book, though—sixteen to be exact:

1. Who am I to write a book? My experience consists almost entirely of writing things for the Internet: tweets, blog posts, and short articles. I feel like the e-cigarette version of a writer: not real and kind of annoying.
2. I was accused of plagiarism. An experiment in chasing Internet fame ended in conviction, a lifetime sentence of Internet infamy. What happens on the Internet stays

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on the Internet. A quick Google search of my name should do the trick if you don't know the story. Google at your own risk. Apparently there is a certain kind of celebrity who bears a similar name.

3. My family might disown me. Anne Lamott once wrote, "You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should've behaved better."<sup>2</sup> I love my family and friends. I love my relationships with them. We've all come a long way, and I wouldn't be the person I am apart from them. Also, some of them should have behaved better. Mainly me.
4. I don't want to stir up Twittergate 2.0. I hope that I've learned from my mistakes. I've owned as much as I can and reached out to make amends where I thought it would be appropriate. But I would love not to stir up anything again.
5. I'm terrified of doing a book that is essentially a literary "selfie." The goal is to share my story where I believe it will be helpful. I pray it's not a bunch of narcissistic psychobabble.
6. I'm terrified of doing a book that is frowned upon by my tribe. The people and leaders in my particular corner of the Christian faith all mean the world to me, and I want to write something that makes them proud. I'm nervous this won't be the case.
7. I don't have a decent picture to go on the back of this book. No one tells you how weird it feels to ask a photographer to take your headshot. I completely understand

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the people who used to think that having your picture taken steals a little part of your soul. Maybe I'll just use the caricature I had drawn for twenty dollars in Myrtle Beach when I was in the seventh grade.

8. I'm pretty awkward when signing autographs. It's happened a handful of times. Signing an autograph feels like using the bathroom at a football stadium: it's uncomfortable, dirty, and you hope no one sees you. Also, what do you write? From now on I'm just going to write, "This is awkward," because I mean it and it fits.
9. I wanted to do a book on donuts. It would have been an e-book consisting mainly of short reviews of the best donuts I've ever had. Maybe this dream will be book number three, after *The Fault in Our Starburst: A Brief History of the Yellow Ones*.
10. I don't have an author's name. Sammy? I've only seen my name in kids' books. My full name, Samuel, isn't any better. It sounds like I should have died fighting in the Civil War. Maybe I'll go with S. R. R. Rhodes. Seems to work for J. R. R. Tolkien and George R. R. Martin.
11. I don't have a cool soundtrack that helped me write this book. Unless you count the sounds coming from the ladies' parlor in the church where my office is, or the restless whines of our four children. I'm just going to claim The National. During most of my time writing, I half-listened to them. Also their music is mostly about feeling awkward and being vulnerable.
12. Who am I to tell my story? I know this is the voice of my insecurities talking. Also Satan. They sound a lot

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- alike. The courage to do so comes from the belief that my story matters to God and will be helpful to others. Because of that it is worth telling. Yours is too. I hope telling mine is an invitation for others to share in turn.
13. I didn't scribble my book on napkins while riding a train like J. K. Rowling. At least that's how I heard she wrote the first Harry Potter book. Mine has been hashed out on a MacBook Air in various coffee shops across town, which feels like a giant cliché. On the plus side, unlike J. K. Rowling, I can text "jk" to my friends to say I'm "just kidding" without confusing them.
  14. I can't bring myself to call myself a writer. Maybe this will change, but it feels like the kind of bragging that makes everyone else roll their eyes. Calling yourself a writer feels like being the guy who brings a guitar to a party. You're shoving your perceived ability in everyone's faces. Maybe this will change when my donut e-book is a *New York Times* bestseller.
  15. I don't smoke. Let me rephrase that. I don't smoke like real smokers smoke. Will I fake inhale an American Spirit with friends during a night out? Absolutely. Do my friends know I'm fake inhaling? Absolutely not. At least not until this very moment.
  16. My insecurity runs deep. My greatest fear in writing a book is that it will be bad. My next greatest fear is that it will be boring. My next, next greatest fear is that the combination of these two will make me look dumb. How many things in my life have I not done out of the fear of looking stupid? *No mas*. I think that means "no

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more.” Not sure because I took French. *Je suis* Sammy and *Je suis* awkward.

Then there is the one reason I really want to write this book: I genuinely believe that our awkwardness and awkward moments are invitations to know more deeply the grace of God. Awkwardness is an invitation to vulnerability, and vulnerability is where intimacy and connection are found.

I want to be vulnerable. In my best moments, I believe in grace. My hope for this book is that its awkwardness will itself be an invitation to the kind of vulnerability that can only happen if grace is true.

Vulnerability is hard. But grace is true. So let’s make some awkward.

## Chapter One

# ***DON'T WASTE YOUR AWKWARDNESS***

2:08 p.m., Friday, July 18, at Drip Coffee

### **MAYBE IT'S BETTER TO START WITH AN OUTLINE? ALSO**

I find myself avoiding writing like an introvert trying to avoid a guy with an acoustic guitar at a party. I'm nervous about the topic. Is awkwardness relatable enough? Biblical enough? Sellable enough? Writing feels like trying to find the vein for a needle to release the blood that will save lives. Okay, that could be a seriously overinflated view of writing. I'm sitting in Drip. I just ordered a tasty tomato special. I took my first Uber today. I'm typing words because I need to get into a "flow," but it's not working. Also I saw *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* with a friend while at "lunch." When I go to the movies during the day, I feel like Don Draper on *Mad Men*, except I'm not cheating on my wife and don't have a drinking problem. Oh, my sandwich

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just came so hold that thought. . . . That was delicious. I got fruit because I'm trying to lose weight. Getting fruit instead of chips feels like the adult thing to do, which is another way of saying the "unfun" thing to do. Being an adult is hard. Back to the book. Where should I start? This whole book feels like a giant beach ball greased up with sunscreen, and I can't quite hold on to it long enough to get under water without it slipping out of my hands again. Writer Anne Lamott says somewhere that most of the time you have to put butt in chair and write, write, write.<sup>1</sup> Seems like Super Glue would help. So it's 2:20 p.m. now, and I need some Super Glue.

If we had to make our relationship with awkwardness Facebook official, we probably would have to choose the "it's complicated" option. On the one hand, we are drawn to awkwardness. It's in the shows we love: *The Office*, *Arrested Development*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Modern Family*, and *New Girl*. It's in the actors and comics we love too: Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill, Zooey Deschanel, Amy Poehler, Ty Burrell, Ricky Gervais, Louis C. K., and Jim Gaffigan. We can't seem to get enough of awkwardness.<sup>2</sup>

And yet we are terrified of it, especially of being marked with what my friend Les Newsom calls the new scarlet letter: "A" for "awkwardness." One of our greatest fears is leaving a party only to have friends lock eyes with each other and complain about how awkward we are. We might be drawn to it, but there's still a social stigma in awkwardness we would like to avoid.

Maybe we haven't yet realized that we are both drawn to

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awkwardness and afraid of it because deep down we are all awkward people. Just think about the last time you were in an elevator. Everyone's awkwardness shines a little brighter in an elevator.

I probably should define awkwardness. I don't mean wearing Crocs with socks (if you do, please gently lay down this book and text your most fashionable friend for help), or that you make small talk look harder than solving a Rubik's cube, or that you're the person everyone avoids introducing new people to at a party.

What I mean is that there's a gap between what you are and what you should be, a disconnect between the real you and the ideal you. What awkward moments (and people) do is simply shine the spotlight on that gap, revealing the cracks in our humanity, no matter how shiny and cool we may seem on the outside.

I remember the first time this came home to me in a real way, even if it's taken me years to learn how to articulate it. I was sitting in the world's saddest movie theater in Sumter, South Carolina, taking in *Meet the Parents* for the first time. And I suddenly realized that I was Ben Stiller. From the painful conversations to the desperate attempts at validation, I had never seen a movie that so perfectly captured the awkwardness that was my life.

Say the wrong thing. Do the wrong thing. Think the wrong thing. Repeat. Is that a life motto I can get tattooed somewhere?

For a long time I thought being awkward was a me-thing. But then I realized it's an us-thing. Some of us may

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feel more awkward than others, and some of us may act more awkward than others. At the end of the day, all of us not only have moments that make us feel awkward, we also have parts of our lives that are awkward to talk about.

One of my favorite awkward moments involves a friend. He was in college but home for the summer. The important thing to know is he was a full-grown man. And for some reason that day as he stepped out of the shower he decided that he would go downstairs wearing nothing but a towel and surprise his mom. And he did, by slipping off the towel and doing a naked dance as his mom talked on the phone.

The reason I love that story so much, besides how hilariously awkward it is, is that even though my friend was simply doing something he thought would be funny, the image illustrates a deep longing to be known and loved. The truth about awkward moments is that they're awkward because we long to be embraced as we are, not as we should be.

Again, that's what awkwardness is, the gap between what we should be and what we actually are. Life is awkward because it doesn't go the way that it *should* go. People are awkward because they don't do and say and think what they *should* do and say and think. All of us are awkward because all of us experience this gap in some way.

The gaps are hard to talk about, though, because they expose us for who we really are: someone who falls "short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The problem is, like the bad guys at the end of *Scooby-Doo*, we hate being exposed. But awkwardness is always an invitation to admit the truth

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about who we really are. And that makes us vulnerable, which is hard. Will anyone really love me if they see all the places where I fall short?

A few years ago I met with a student who had lived most of his life with a porn addiction. He got into it early by accident. But that accident gradually gave way to dependency, and what once seemed intriguingly gross transformed into a way of coping with the stresses and failures of life.

Over coffee he told me that sex, much less pornography addiction, was simply not something that was ever discussed in church. He grew up in one of those gospel-centered, published-author, preachers-whose-podcasts-you-download kind of churches. His family felt the same way. As in many good Southern families, sex was simply not something appropriate to talk about. Ever.

What he said nearly broke my heart: “Because no one ever talked about porn, I felt like it must be the worst sin in the world, and so I was so scared and ashamed to tell anyone about it.” What my student was describing was shame.

One of the saddest realities of life is the things we need to talk about the most are the things we tend to talk about the least. Shame is often the culprit. Author and speaker Brené Brown says that shame only needs three things to survive: secrecy, silence, and judgment.<sup>3</sup> If you look behind your awkward moments, you will almost always find shame.

Shame is exactly what Adam and Eve experienced in the Bible in Genesis 3. After failing in a pretty spectacular way, they were incredibly afraid to meet God, so they covered themselves with fig leaves and hid. It was the first

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awkward moment in the history of the universe; it was the first walk of shame, too, and it happened to be away from God. It's hard to know exactly what Adam and Eve were thinking after they realized their sin. They seem to do a good bit of minimizing, blaming, and covering. Instead of going to God in their newly realized nakedness, they tried to handle it themselves. Why? Shame.

Shame, simply put, is the subjective experience of objective guilt. It's that moment where we know and feel that we've done something wrong. It's always easier to live in shame than in vulnerability, to try to hide and cover ourselves instead of going to God (and others) with our brokenness. Adam and Eve covered their nakedness and hid from God, rather than being vulnerable with him about what really happened. Shame is like the invisibility cloak in Harry Potter, except the reason you don't want people to see you is that you're afraid if they really did they would run.

A few months ago I was grabbing dinner with a friend, and we were talking about our weeks. That particular week had been hard for me because a pastor-friend in town had been invited to speak at the biggest ministry on our campus. So I started talking about how jealous I was of him, and how hard it was for me to be around him because I get really insecure over how gifted he is. As I was saying these things, I happened to glance behind me, and there sat his best friend. He'd heard everything but played it off really well. It's in the top ten awkward moments of my life, one of those moments when I wished I had Professor X's mutant powers so I could wipe away that memory from ever happening.

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As I was driving home that night, though, it struck me that this awkward moment could actually be a gift of God's grace. A moment pregnant with awkwardness could also be a moment when friendship is born because the only thing worse than confessed insecurity and jealousy is unconfessed insecurity and jealousy, even if it does make things ten thousand times more awkward.

What God did for Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 is something we desperately need to look at. He looks for them, and instead of scolding them when he finds them, he asks them some heart-searching questions. When God asks questions he doesn't do so like a passive-aggressive mother-in-law, looking to scold or shame; he does so as a loving father who cares for the well-being of his children.

Then he does something so remarkable we could easily miss it. He tells them to take off the fig leaves because he has a new set of clothes for them to put on, clothes he himself provides from the skins of the newly named animals in the garden. Instead of shaming them, he covers their shame. Like a parent dressing a child, he clothes and protects them to keep them safe and warm. His gracious action is what enables them to risk vulnerability. Perhaps the apostle Paul had this in mind when he later wrote that "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4).

The story of Adam and Eve is the first place in the Bible that points toward salvation through sacrifice. In order for Adam and Eve to live, something had to die. In order for them to be covered, something had to be stripped. The Bible says this is exactly what Jesus came to do for us; the

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Lamb of God was slain for the sins of the world. At the cross Jesus was stripped so that we might be covered. The reason we can be vulnerable is that the God of the universe was first vulnerable for us. Because he has secured our forgiveness—the once-and-for-all taking away of our shame—vulnerability goes from being a life-threatening act to a life-giving one.

When my youngest daughter was three, she played hide-and-seek badly. She would find her hiding spot, typically a closet upstairs, close herself in with the doors not quite shut, and then loudly begin to say, “In here! I’m in here!” until someone found her. She loved to hide, but she wanted to be found.

So do we. We love to hide from each other. We hide our flaws, our defects, and anything we feel will make us look like we don’t have it all together. We hide how we’re really doing, even from our closest friends and family. Because, like Adam and Eve, we’re afraid the person who finds us will condemn and judge us. So we lock ourselves away, resolving to never share the things in our lives that are killing us: broken relationships with parents, lust that’s blossoming into addiction, depression that’s overwhelming us to the point of wanting to end it all, a relationship with food that makes us hate and do harmful things to our bodies.

But we still long to be found. It’s why websites like PostSecret and Tumblr exist. They are places where we can talk freely about our struggles without running the risk of being judged by our family, friends, or potential employers. The problem with being vulnerable online with people

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who barely know us versus being vulnerable in real life with friends and family is that it never quenches the thirst we have to be both known and loved. Being found involves both: being really known and truly loved.

1:24 p.m., Saturday, July 19, in my bed

**MIRACLE OF MIRACLES, THE KIDS SLEPT IN UNTIL** almost eleven this morning. But then so did I. I stayed in bed until noon like I'm a college kid. My mom is visiting, which is why I had the luxury of sleeping in. Connecting with my mom isn't exactly easy. What do we talk about? Someone close to her is in jail right now, and it's affecting her way more than I thought it would. Sadly my first thought upon hearing the news was, *You should watch Orange Is the New Black on Netflix.* Maybe my spiritual gift is genuinely believing TV shows make everything magically better. Hard to describe the oneness I feel with Don Draper and Tony Soprano and Walter White and, oddly, Liz Lemon. Honestly, I probably watch television to fill the time normally spent being afraid to do something. Also started Stephen King's book on writing this afternoon. Even prayed that the Lord would make it helpful to me to start writing my book. That sentence still doesn't feel right. My book. Why should I write a book? Can I write a book? Those are the twin demons messing with me right now. "Can" and "should." Still no golden tablets from heaven telling me exactly what I should do.

When I say vulnerability, I don't mean the fake vulnerability that loves confession and hates repentance, the kind that we use as a tool to get others to like us. Vulnerability in

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the name of approval is at best a trick, at worst a way of deep deception. I mean the kind of vulnerability that brings the innermost thoughts out from behind the closed doors in our minds. The kind that begins to put words to our deepest struggles. It brings things from the secrecy of the dark to the transparency of the light.

This is where grace comes into the picture. We will never risk vulnerability unless we believe in the kind of grace that says you are loved where you are, not where you've been pretending to be.<sup>4</sup> The good news is that grace is precisely for those who've been hiding because they know they've fallen into that gap between what they should be and what they are. This is also the bad news about grace. It's only for those who have stopped pretending and admitted where they really are. It's for those who, like the tax collector in Jesus' parable in Luke 18, keenly feel the wideness of that gap between what they are and what they should be so they can only pray, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

The reason vulnerability is hard is that we don't believe in this kind of grace. Many of us aren't open about our struggles because grace hasn't moved from a concept to a reality.<sup>5</sup> We're like Isaiah in the temple: we'll never have a true sense of our brokenness until we meet the living God, and we'll never have a true sense of his grace until he meets us with his unspeakable forgiveness (Jer. 6). God's grace makes the vulnerability that used to seem impossible, possible. Because we know that his love and acceptance don't depend on what we do but on what he has done. So the moment we cry with Isaiah, "Woe is me," is the same

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moment we hear the voice of God singing over us, “I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jer. 31:3).

It’s the same with Adam and Eve: the moment they began to tell God what they had done was the same moment God began to cover their shame. This seems to be something like a principle in the Bible. The more you get to know God, the more you get to know yourself in all your awkwardness; and the more you get to know yourself, the more you get to know God in all his grace and mercy.<sup>6</sup>

Awkwardness is an invitation to vulnerability, and vulnerability is where intimacy and connection are born. Awkwardness is also an invitation to throw yourself upon the grace that makes vulnerability possible at all. In the words of author and speaker Adam Kotsko,

Social orders arise and perhaps evolve and eventually fall, but awkwardness will endure as long as we remain human because it is what *makes* us human. What Ricky Gervais and Judd Apatow point toward . . . is indeed an awkwardness so awkward it becomes its own kind of grace—it is the peculiar kind of grace that allows us to break down and admit that we are finally nothing more or less than human beings who will always be stuck with each other and, more importantly, to admit that we are glad of it.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the day, awkward people are the only kind of people God loves because awkward people are the only kind of people there are. I hope what follows in this

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book will be a kind of invitation for you—an invitation to embrace your awkwardness and be surprised that, as you do, you will find yourself becoming more intimate, more connected, and ultimately more human.

One of my favorite lines in movie history comes from a fortune-teller in Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise*. Jesse (played by Ethan Hawke) and Celine (played by Julie Delpy) have met by chance on a train, and after an incredibly engaging conversation, they spend the night walking the streets of Vienna, where they run into a fortune-teller. They jokingly decide it would be fun to have her tell their fortunes. What she says is this: "Resign yourself to the awkwardness of life."

We could say resign yourself to your own awkwardness too. Resign yourself to the awkwardness of talking about where you are, not who you've been pretending to be. Resign yourself to the awkwardness of being vulnerable about your struggles with close friends and family. Resign yourself to the awkward reality that there will always be a gap between what you should be and what you are. Resign yourself to the awkwardness of God's work of grace in you to begin to close that gap while simultaneously making you able to talk about it. Resign yourself to the awkwardness of life.

Don't waste your awkwardness. It may be the very place you learn to be vulnerable and thus experience the grace of God.