

Meeting God at the Shack: A Journey into Spiritual Recovery
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Warning

I suggest that you read *The Shack* before you read this book because knowledge of the plot is assumed. I do not want to spoil your experience of reading the novel for the first time.

But after reading this book, read *The Shack* again. Open yourself up to the spiritual recovery, growth and development that God's Spirit may work in your life toward the Grand Purpose for which God created and redeemed us.

Dedication

In the past eighteen months many have showered their love upon me....

my employment—both Lipscomb University and Harding Graduate School

my counselors—I have learned much about myself through your help

my church—Woodmont Hills Family of God

my bible class—the Sonseekers of Woodmont Hills

my men's groups—where I continue to learn and practice intimacy

my spiritual care team—God's gift to Jennifer and myself

my small group—you are all such a joy to me

my brothers and sisters—Mack, Sue and Jack

my nieces and nephews—Allison, Brittany, Ian, Carson, Logan

my mom—you love me no matter what

my daughters—Ashley and Rachel, both faithful and loving

my wife, Jennifer, for whose steadfast love I am deeply

grateful and without whom I would not be able to share

my story in this book.

They have embraced me and through them God has loved me profoundly.

Thank you!

Preface

A broken and contrite spirit, O God, you will not despise.

Psalm 51:17 (NIV)

William P. Young's *The Shack* became a national bestseller in 2008 and as of July 2009 had sold 7.2 million copies. It has remained on the New York Bestsellers list for more than a year. More importantly, it has touched the hearts of many hurting people. At the same time it has been the object of hostile attacks from those who believe the novel undermines Christian orthodoxy.

I read the book at the end of January 2008. Moved to tears several times, I was emotionally and intellectually engaged by Young's storytelling. This modern parable addresses some of the most perplexing topics of Christian theology as well as some of humanity's most gut-wrenching experiences. Writing about Trinity (God as three and one), atonement (why did Jesus die?), providence (how God works in the world), suffering, theodicy (can God justify evil?), death of children, parental abuse, forgiving murderers, forgiving self, forgiving God, incarnation (is Jesus both God and human?), etc. is difficult prose to write, even more difficult to describe in a novel. Such an ambitious task is either foolhardy or courageous but nevertheless at least interesting and intriguing. I found it compelling.

As the book emerged as a phenomenon, several asked me to review it and comment on some of the theological controversy surrounding it. Since I had experienced hurt and pain similar to what the novel describes and had prayed, reflected, taught (in churches and academia) and written about that pain, some thought that perhaps I might have something helpful to say about how to read this novel. I have hesitated for several reasons.

I read the book on the verge of my own crisis—I would confront some of my own "demons" in the first weeks of February 2008. I entered a period of rest from ministry and academia just after reading Young's work. Sometimes I wonder if the book even contributed to the timing of my own "shack" as it introduced me to recovery ideas. In any event, I did not want to rush into the blog-o-sphere or into print about the story. I needed time to process my own stuff without focusing on Young's "shack."

Also, I was rather uninterested in the theological controversy swirling around the book. I did not want to engage in any theological debates, nuances, or heresy trials. I did not want to spend time parsing the meaning and specifics of parabolic descriptions and dialogue as if in a heated religious or academic debate. Ultimately, I came to believe the novel had a much more important significance than some of those disputes.

Further, the subjects Young discusses are close to my own story, heart, and study. Some of the story was too painful to discuss early on. Some of it was too ambiguous (as it seemed at first reading) to pursue with any profit. I needed to work through my own "shack" before engaging Young's parable.

Towards the end of 2008 I changed my mind. The previous several months of my own recovery prepared me to read Young's work again but this time more empathetically. I am still rather uninterested in the theological debates since I find most of them picky and distortions of Young's intent. Instead, I am interested in the spiritual therapy, recovery and healing available through the book as God's Spirit uses it for such.

I turned my attention to Young's novel after I received a request to lecture on it near the end of September 2008. I was asked to substitute for a speaker who was scheduled to speak on *The Shack* at the 2008 Zoe Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. I had not spoken anywhere since the first weekend of February. I did not intend to speak anywhere other than in a Bible class at the Woodmont Hills Family of God in Nashville (beginning that November) for the rest of 2008. However, this invitation seemed like God's timing.

As my wife Jennifer and I talked about the possibility, it became clear to us that perhaps this was a moment designed by God for my sake. We discerned that this is about what God wants to do in my "shack." It would give me an opportunity to reflect in a focused way on my own story in the light of Young's parable and metaphors. In other words, I agreed to speak for my own sake more than any other motive.

I had lots of anxiety about speaking, particularly on the emotional subjects which *The Shack* raises. But Jennifer, my spiritual advisors and I felt it was time and this was an opportunity practically (more accurately, divinely) tailored for me. I felt called to speak again at that moment at that time on that subject.

So, I read *The Shack* again. It was a different experience for two reasons. First, I listened to Paul Young talk about his own story. This is available in many formats on the internet from webcasts to podcasts. Any part of his story that I tell in this book is derived from his own public words available through the internet. Second, this time I heard the language of spiritual recovery since I now had ears to hear due to my own journey into emotional, spiritual and psychological healing.

Consequently, my engagement with *The Shack* does not begin with the controversial questions for which the book has been attacked. Some of them are good questions—goddess worship? open theism? modalism? (some readers are even now saying “huh?”)—but they are marginal to my concerns as a griever and recovering addict. And we are all addicts—sin itself is an addiction before which we are powerless on our own (Romans 7), and we all express our brokenness in some form of addiction—overeating, shopping, sex, alcohol, drugs, materialism, work, busyness, television, video games, etc., etc., etc. Reading *The Shack* as a wounded person or as an addict is much more important than the theological questions it raises.

The first part of this book discusses spiritual recovery while the second part addresses some of the theological questions that concern many. But even in the second part I am much more interested in how this parable and the theological questions it raises offer an entrance into the substantial themes of divine love, forgiveness, healing and hope. These are the main concerns of the book.

I think the question the novel addresses is this:

How do wounded people come to believe that God really is “especially fond” of them?

Only after reading the book through this lens are we able to understand how Young uses some rather unconventional metaphors to deepen his point.

My interest is to unfold the story of recovery in *The Shack* as I experienced it through my own journey. So, I invite you to walk with me through the maze of grief, hurt, and pain as we, through experiencing Mackenzie’s shack, face our own “shacks.”

Introduction

The Literary Genre of *The Shack*

Chapter One

What Kind of Book is the Shack?

I will open my mouth with a parable, I will teach you lessons from the past.

Psalm 78:2 (TNIV)

While some have perhaps read *The Shack* as an actual account, the title page identifies the piece as a “*novel*.” This is a fictional story. But...it is nevertheless true.

When Paul Young talks about his book, he identifies it as an extended modern parable. Like a parable, the events described are fictional though possible (that is, it is not science fiction). And, like a parable, it becomes a world into which we step to hear something true about God, life and the soul.

The Prodigal Son (Luke 15), for example, is a fictional but true story. As fiction the story has no correspondence in fact, that is, it is not a story about a specific, actual family. No one walked up to Jesus after the parable to ask the name of the son, which family he came from and into which “far country” he went. Whether it is actual history or not is irrelevant. It is a fictional tale. But the story is nevertheless true. The Prodigal Son says something true about God and his relationship with his children.

A parabolic story draws the listener or reader into the world of the parable so that we can see something from a particular angle. A parable is not comprehensive theology, but a story-shaped way of saying a particular thing. As a piece of art rather than didactic prose, it allows a person to hear that point in an emotional as well as intellectual way. It gives us imagery, metaphor, and pictures to envision the truth rather than merely describing it in prose. Rather than analyzing propositions, we become part of a parable’s narrative. We are free to experience our own life again as we are guided by the storyteller.

Parables, as the parables of Jesus often do, sucker-punch us so that we begin to see something we had not previously seen about ourselves, God or the world. They speak to us emotionally in ways that pure prose does not usually do, much like music, art and poetry are expressive in ways that transcend discursive or academic descriptions. This enables the right side (the artsy side) of our brains to connect with what the left side (the analytical side) of our brain thinks about. We

can feel these truths rather than simply think about them. As a result those truths can connect with our guts (our core beliefs about ourselves) in ways that our intellect cannot reach. The truths, then, can settle into our hearts as well as our minds.

The Shack is, I think, a piece of serious theological reflection in parabolic form. It is not a systematic theology. It does not cover every possible topic nor reflect on God from every potential angle. That is not its intent. That would be too much to expect from a parable. The “Prodigal Son,” for example, is not a comprehensive teaching about God.

Rather, the focus of *The Shack* is rather narrow. Fundamentally, given my own experience and hearing Young talk about his intent, I read the book as answering this question:

How do wounded people journey through their hurt to truly believe in their gut that God really loves them despite the condition of their “shack”?

The parable is about how we feel about ourselves in our own “shacks.” Do we really believe—deep in our guts, not just in our heads—that God is “especially fond” of us? How can God love us when our “shacks” are a mess? The parable addresses these feelings, self-images and woundedness.

The theology of *The Shack* engages us at this level. It encourages us to embrace the loving relationship into which God invites us. Consequently, it does not answer every question, address every aspect of God’s nature or reflect on every topic of Christian theology. Instead, it zeros in on the fundamental way in which wounded souls erect barriers that muzzle the divine invitation to loving relationship.

When reading *The Shack* as serious theological reflection, it is important to keep in mind two key points. First, Young wrote the story to share his own journey into spiritual recovery with his kids. His family recognizes that he is “Mack,” that Missy is his own lost childhood, and Mack’s encounter with God over a weekend is a telescoped parable of his own ten year journey to find healing. It is a story into which Young’s children could enter to understand their father’s journey from tragedy to hope, from barrenness to relationship with God.

Second, it is serious theology in that he shares a vision of God that is at the root of his healing. The parable teaches truth—the truth he came to believe through the process of his own recovery and healing. The “truth,” however, is not that God is an African American woman (a metaphor which has angered some). That is simply a parabolic form. Rather, the truth is that God is “especially fond” of Paul (Mack) despite his “shack” (his “stuff”).

This message, once it found a publisher, became available for others beyond his children. It has now become a parable for other readers, and Young invites us to see that the truth he discovered in his own recovery is true for every one of us. God is “especially fond” of each of us no matter what the condition of our “shacks”.

In the brief chapters that follow I will use Young’s parable as an occasion for thinking about some significant themes in spiritual recovery. *The Shack* will provide the fodder but I will not limit myself to Young’s book in developing the themes. Using the novel as a starting place, I will pursue these themes in the context of my own spiritual journey as well as placing them within the Story of God as told in Scripture.

While one aspect of my purpose is to discern whether *The Shack* deserves the hostility that some have given it, my larger intent is to reflect on spiritual recovery in the context of my own journey to find healing. We will walk along side Mack as he receives a vision of God which wounded people need and want to hear—a vision available in Scripture itself.

So, I invite you to reflect on these themes with me—to process them within your own journey, out of your own woundedness and in relationship with your own God.

Part II

Looking Life in the Eye

Entering our Shacks

Chapter Two

What is the Shack?

Mackenzie,

It's been a while. I've missed you.

I'll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together there.

Papa

God invited Mack to the shack (p. 16). His first gut feeling was nausea but it quickly turned to anger. He had always tried to avoid thinking about the shack. He never went to the shack. He insulated himself from it in every way. He did not even talk about the shack with others except in the vaguest forms, including his wife Nan.

The shack created turmoil in the pit of Mack's stomach. The shack was a dead and empty place; it had a twisted, evil face. It was a metaphor for emptiness, unanswered questions, and far-flung accusations against God (p. 77).

Yet, God wants to meet Mack at the shack.

"Why *the shack*—the icon of his deepest pain?" Mack rages in his inner thoughts. "Certainly God would have better places to meet him?" (p. 65).

The shack, metaphorically, is Mack's own woundedness, his hurt. It is where Mack keeps his secrets, his hidden thoughts and he does not let anyone—even his wife Nan—into his shack.

We each have our own shack.

The shack is Young's metaphor for his hidden, wounded self. It is his real self; the self that hides behind the façade which projects his life as if it were a beautiful, well-kept house. The shack is Young's soul. It is something which he and others built, just as our own shacks are built through our own experiences and choices, joys and tragedies. William P. Young, the author, is Mackenzie Allen Phillips, the main character in the story.

Young's soul is pictured in *The Shack* as a shack. The story is fictional but true. It is the story of a wounded soul filled with hidden secrets, addictions, and lies. In this story Young's true self meets God.

Young has told his own personal story in several settings, but the most powerful telling to which I have listened is to a small group in the home of a friend who attends the Mariner's church in California. His personal story is worth seventy-five minutes of your time and is available at the following website:

<http://www.marinerschurch.org/theshack/av/index.html#>

He grew up as a missionary kid in New Guinea. Without cultural identity, physically and emotionally abused by his angry father, sexually abused by other children, he himself became a predator of sorts. To manage his wounds and medicate his pain, he became a religion addict—a perfectionistic performer, and ultimately sexual sin overtook him in his late 30s while a minister.

The years of guilt and shame took its toll on Paul. He built his own shack where the shame could reside, where the woundedness could hide. He attempted to win God's approval just like he attempted to earn his own father's approval. He went to Bible College, then to seminary, and then into the ministry. He wanted a relationship with God that was close, but did not know how to access it.

His life was filled with shame. On the outside, it looked like his house was in order, neatly kept as God's good minister. His perfectionistic attempts at performance hid the shame as he attempted to achieve some kind of self-worth. Maybe God would forgive him, love him, and accept him if he worked hard to compensate for the sin and shame which he found unable to control. To do this, he had to stuff and numb his feelings. He did not know how to feel or talk about feelings. He was empty on the inside except for anger and shame, and he was mostly angry at himself.

He had built a shack hidden by a Hollywood front. The front was a lie—the godly preacher, leader; the shack was the truth—the sinner, the addict. But he could not speak the truth because it was too shameful. He could not speak the truth because that would risk everything. Shack-dwellers do not speak their truth because they fear rejection and shaming by others. If you really knew us, we shack-dwellers believe, you would not like us.

The Shack is Young's parable about how God met him at his shack and changed his life. God invited him to the shack. God met him in his pain and shame—not to judge it but to heal it; not to shame him but to love him. God does not invite us to the shack to shame us or express his disappointment. He invites us to experience his mercy and love. He welcomes us in our own shacks in order to let us know that he is "especially fond" of us.

The Shack invites us to enter into this metaphorical journey to the soul. Paul writes with the prayer that perhaps through this story we will hear God's invitation to meet God at our own shacks and discover anew his mercy.

The last paragraph of the book—the last paragraph of the “Acknowledgements” in the back (p. 252 if it were numbered)—expresses this hope. Though originally written for his own children, as it was published to a wider audience Young invested the novel with the specific purpose that readers might experience God's healing presence in their own shacks.

Most of us have our own grief, broken dreams and damaged hearts, each of us with our unique losses, our own 'shack'. I pray that you will find the same grace there that I did, and the abiding presence of Papa, Jesus and Sarayu will fill up your inside emptiness with joy unspeakable and fully of glory.

William P. Young

Chapter Three

Your Shack, My Shack

*What I feared has come upon me;
what I dreaded has happened to me.*

Job 3:25 (TNIV)

We each have our own shacks.

Our shacks are partly constructed out of our childhood experiences. Missy's murderer, for example, was himself "twisted...into a terror" by his own father (p. 161). Young's childhood in New Guinea gave him the eyes with which he sees the world. Our shacks are situated in the landscape of what we heard and experienced as children. Our "guts" have a default that was set by the time we were twelve years old.

Our "guts" are our core beliefs about ourselves that determine our unconscious response to our experiences. We go there when we are stressed, threatened or sad. We go there when we are afraid and we cope with the beliefs and behaviors that worked then. But what worked as children does not always work so well as adults. For example, overeating ("comfort food") may soothe an emotionally disturbed child but it is a self-destructive behavior for an adult.

Our shacks are, in part, constructed out of life's tragic experiences. Young, for example, lost a brother and a niece to death which profoundly shaped the vibrancy of his life. Whether death, divorce, or addictions among an almost limitless number of other tragedies, these seep into our veins and sedate our joy. We can easily become lifeless zombies living out a meaningless existence because our shacks are so empty, dark and depressing. We try to "make the best of it," but it often seems like a dead end. We medicate it with alcohol, drugs, sex, food, money, shopping, work or whatever offers a moment of relief.

Our shacks are also self-made. We contribute material, labor and time to their construction. Our own actions shape us and sometimes they break us. Young's three month affair broke him. Addictions, for example, arise out of the emotional holes that were dug throughout childhood and other life experiences but they overwhelm us when we do not seek help. Sin may deceive us in our weakness but when we pursue it our shacks are decorated with our own pride, selfishness

and rebellion. While we may not have created our shacks, we are responsible for its decor.

Shacks are where we hide our secrets—our sins, our resentments, our envies, our fears, our hurts, our sorrows, our anger against God. These are the secrets we don't talk about. We don't share them with others. We are afraid to share them. We fear what others will think of us if they knew our shacks.

We are afraid that people will shame us when they hear our secrets. We've heard other people talk—the way they talk about celebrities when they know nothing about them. When we hear people use the secrets of others to condemn and create an aura of self-righteousness, we fear they will do the same to us. It is better, we think, to remain silent. It is better, we suppose, to keep up our façade and bar everyone from our shacks.

We are afraid that people will reject us when they hear our secrets. I vividly remember when my father confessed a grievous sin for which he was deeply penitent how some of his close friends rejected him and no longer remained his intimates. I suspect they were never "intimates" in the first place—they did not know each other's shacks. When they discovered my father's shack through his self-disclosure, they discarded him and ostracized him.

We are afraid that people will not hold our confidences when we tell them our secrets. Sharing our shacks is risky. It takes trust. But trust is what shacks lack most. That is one reason they are shacks rather than mansions. It is also a reason why faith is so difficult in the shack.

Most of all, I think, we are afraid of our own shacks. We know how dirty they are. We know their pain. We would much rather flee from our shacks—avoid them, ignore them or pretend they don't exist. We don't want to go to our shacks and face ourselves. It is just too hard. It is easier to erect the Hollywood front and live an illusion. But we know it isn't real and consequently we hate ourselves because we know we are living a lie.

The shack is the last place where we want to meet God. He knows our shacks too well and we are ashamed of them. We fear what God might do with us because of our shacks, and this fear is especially intense if we grew up with a kind of "hellfire and brimstone" God. At bottom, we don't trust God either.

I understand these feelings. I have experienced them in my shack. My shack, like yours, is complicated. It is filled—like most—with childhood experiences, life’s tragedies and my own sins. I will share some of them as we progress through this brief book, but it would probably be helpful to share some pieces of my story—something of the condition of my shack—at this point.

My shack includes, among other things, death, divorce and addiction.

I married when I was nineteen—already a graduate of college (part of my addiction to work my way towards approval)—but widowed when I was twenty-two. I remember how embarrassed I was to grieve publicly. I remember how angry I was with God. I remember how lonely and empty I felt in the years following Sheila’s death. I recognize now that I have only truly grieved her death in recent months.

I remarried, adopted Ashley and welcomed Joshua and Rachel into this world. But early on it was apparent that Joshua had a problem. When he was six we discovered he had a terminal genetic condition and Joshua died at the age of sixteen in 2001. My anger towards God returned but I mostly tried to hide it. Instead, I “chose” to play the “hero”—keeping my grief and tears private. I put “chose” in quotation marks because in one sense I did not choose it. It was my role in the world, so I thought. And, so, I did not fully grieve Joshua’s death either.

Then my marriage ended. Perhaps the grief was too much for us, but the hiddenness of my shack and the pretensions of my façade contributed greatly to the demise of my marriage. I was not emotionally present for my wife in our grief because to be present would mean facing my shack and I did not like to go there. It was too painful. And in the brokenness of avoiding my shack I contributed to the death of my own marriage and created more pain—not only for me, but for my wife, my children and my family.

The shack became a breeding ground for addiction. I am a workaholic. I seek to fill my emptiness and avoid my pain by immersing myself in tasks or busyness. But it doesn’t work. My shack is too big, too empty and too tragic to be soothed by something as ultimately superficial as “work.”

That is, in part, my shack. Facing my shack, entering it and seeking God there has been my redemption. Perhaps you can see why—in some small way—Paul

Young's *The Shack* has been a meaningful story for me as I knocked on the door of my own shack.

Everyone has a shack. And God is present in everyone's shack waiting for us to show up. But shacks don't accommodate God very well—at least as we see our own shacks. In fact, we may have even been to the shack before (if only briefly) to seek God but we could not find him; he was not there, so it seemed.

That, of course, is Mack's initial experience. And it is often our own as well.

Chapter Four

"God, I Hate You!"

Dear God.

I hate you.

Love,

Madeleine (L'Engle)

I meditated on this brief prayer for months after I read it. Initially, I was horrified by how much I identified with the prayer and I was troubled by the prayer's resonance in my soul. My first reaction, however, was "I get the point."

So did Mack. He had become "sick of God" over the years since Missy's death (p. 66). But he went to the shack at God's invitation, doubting whether it really was God. As he entered the shack for the first time in over three years his emotions exploded (p. 78).

Mack bellowed the questions most sufferers ask and most often they begin with the word "Why?" "Why did you let this happen? Why did you bring me here? Of all the places to meet you—why *here*?" In a "blind rage" he threw a chair at the window and began smashing everything in sight with one of its legs. He vented his anger. His body released the emotions he had stored up in it.

Anger, if not resolved or healed, simmers inside of us. It becomes part of our body and we feel it in our chest, stomachs, shoulders or neck. It destroys us from within. One day it will explode. For over three years Mack had suppressed this anger but now alone in the shack it poured out with a vengeance. "Groans and moans of despair and fury spat through his lips as he beat his wrath into this terrible place."

Fatigue ended his rampage, but not his anger or despair. The pain remained; it was familiar to him, "almost like a friend." This darkness was Mack's "closest friend" just as it was for Heman in Psalm 88:18. "*The Great Sadness*" burdened him and there was no escape (p. 79). There was no one to whom he could turn, so he thought. Even God did not show up at the shack.

It would be better to be dead, to just get it over with, right? When great sadness descends on us, sometimes—like Mack—we think it is better to simply die and be rid of the pain. We think we would be better off dead if for no other reason

than that the hurting would stop. Or, like Job, we might wish we had never been born (Job 3). Contemplating suicide, Mack cried himself to sleep on the floor of the shack.

Rising after what “was probably only minutes,” Mack, still seethed with anger, and berating his own seeming idiocy he walked out of the shack. “I’m done, God.” He was worn out and “tired of trying to find [God] in all of this” (p. 80).

This scene is Mack’s true self. It is Mack in the shack. It is the pent-up, growing and cancerous feelings of anger, bitterness and resentment toward God. God, after all, did not protect Missy. God was no “Papa” to Missy in her deepest distress and need. The journey to discover God is not worth it. It is too hard, too gut-wrenching, and useless!

In his rage Mack expressed the words that seethed underneath the anger, resentment, disappointment and pain. “I hate you!” he shouted.

“I hate you.” Them's fighting words, it seems to me. It expresses our fight (or, as in the case of Jacob, wrestling) with God. Sometimes we flee our shacks but at other times we may go to our shacks to find God only to discover we have a fight on our hands because God did not show up. This is Mack’s initial experience.

The word "hate" stands for all the frustration, agitation, disgust, exasperation, and bewilderment we experience in the seeming absence of God as we live in a suffering, painful and hurting world. "Hate" is a fightin' word—a representation of the inexplicable pain in our lives; a word that is used as a weapon to inflict pain on the one whom we judge to be the source of the pain. Sometimes, perhaps, we are too polite with God. Sometimes we are not “real” with the Creator. Sometimes, like Jacob in Genesis 32, we need to wrestle with God.

I hear God’s suffering servant Job in this word though he never uses the specific term in his prayers. God has denied Job fairness and justice, and Job is bitter (Job 23:1; 27:2). God is silent. God “throws” Job “into the mud” and treats him as an enemy (Job 30:19-20). God has attacked him and death is his only prospect (Job 30:21, 23). Job is thoroughly frustrated, bitter in his soul, and hopeless about his future (Job 7:11, 21). He does not believe he will ever see happiness again (Job 7:7). God was a friend who turned on him—“hate” might be an accurate description of Job's feelings as he sits on the dung heap.

And yet, just as Madeleine's brief prayer, Job ends with "Love, Job." He speaks to God; Job is not silent. He does not turn from his commitment to God; he does not curse God or deny him. He seeks God even if only to speak to him though he may slay him. He laments, complains, wails and angrily (even sarcastically) addresses the Creator, but he will not turn his back on God (Job 23:10-12; 21:16).

The contrast between "I hate you" and "Love, Madeleine" is powerful. It bears witness to the tension within lament and our experience of the world's brokenness. Though deeply frustrated with the reality that surrounds us (whether it is divorce, the death of a son, the death of a wife, the plight of the poor, AIDS in Africa, etc.) and with the sovereign God who does whatever he pleases (Psalm 115:3; 135:6), we continue to sign our prayers (laments) with love. We have no one else to whom we can turn and there is no else worthy of our love or laments.

We can all get to the point that we are "done" with God, that is, where we are "done" trying to "find God" in our shacks. The search for meaning, relationship and love is often frustratingly slow and fruitless. "I hate you" may be the most simple and shocking way to express our feelings about the whole mess.

Sometimes we blurt out language that expresses our feelings but does not line up with our faith. This can happen when our faith is shaken, confused, threatened or slipping away. It is a common experience among believers when they go to their shacks.

We go to our shacks because we yearn for love, for relationship, for healing, or perhaps because we are desperate and there is nowhere else to go. We sign our prayers with love--"Love, Madeleine" or "Love, John Mark"—as an expression of hope. We want to love, to know love and experience love. It is out of this yearning we pray; it is out of this love we lament.

It is with love we say "I hate you."

The poignant irony of that last sentence is, it seems to me, the essence of honest lament in a broken world.

Chapter Five

Getting a “Triune Shine”

The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

Numbers 6:25 (TNIV)

“Triune Shine”....what is that? Ok, I admit it is my own invention—at least I could not find it anywhere when I googled it. But hear me out.

Many who have attended a 12-Step group for any length of time have heard about the “shine.” It might be an “AA shine,” or an SA, NA, OA, WA, etc. The “shine” is the glow of recovery, and it stands in stark contrast with the first time that someone attends a meeting. In their first meeting addicts enter despondent, shamed and hopeless. They attend a meeting as a last gasp of sanity. Through recovery—working the steps which includes confession and spiritual transformation—they begin to “shine” with hope, joy and contentment.

I have turned the phrase on its head. When I say “triune shine,” I do not mean that the Trinity has gone through recovery. I hope that is obvious. I mean the opposite. An encounter with the Triune God leaves a shine on our faces. It is the afterglow of meeting God in our shacks. It may not be an external glow like when Moses left the Tent of Meeting after being with God, but it is the visible joy on faces that were once full of despair. The shine of Triune love lights up their faces.

Shine, of course, is what shacks need. Our shacks are broken, empty, dark, and hidden. They need healing, filling, light and openness. When our true selves—our shacks—encounter the healing life and light of God in authentic loving relationship, we are transformed into beautiful images of God—beautiful homes or manicured log cabins. Shacks become mansions when we meet God in the circle of love. Our shacks get a triune shine.

This is what Mack experiences. Contemplating suicide, Mack cries himself to sleep on the floor of the shack. He is filled with anger, grief, and pain. This darkness was Mack’s closest friend (much like Psalm 88:18); the “Great Sadness” was all too familiar to him (p. 79).

Upon waking, Mack left the shack only to turn around to see it transformed into a beautiful log cabin with a garden and manicured lake. Hearing laughter from the cabin, Mack cautiously approached its front door (p. 81).

This is a critical moment in the parable and it is a critical moment in our lives. Do we believe that our shacks can become mansions? Do we believe that our pain, hurt and shame can be transformed into joy, beauty, and honor?

My own experience tells me it is well nigh impossible to believe that in the midst of the pain itself. The pain is a fog that blinds us. As Papa says to Mack, "When all you can see is your pain, perhaps then you lose sight of me" (p. 96). Shame accuses us and we feel the guilt and burden of our sin and addictions. I understand how impossible it is to believe; I've been there. The shack is hopeless; the fog is real; the soul is broken.

Addicts—and all who know themselves as sinners are addicts since sin is itself an addiction—feel they deserve the shack. It is where they belong. They are unworthy of God's love; they are a pile of "crap." As Mack thought to himself, while "God might really love" Nan, that is understandable because "she wasn't a screw-up like him" (p. 66). Many of us, shamed by our compulsions and powerless before them, do not believe we are "good" people. Surely, we think, God could not love people like us.

So, Mack, standing on the front porch of the log cabin, is ready to knock on the door. He is angry ("energized by his ire"), but he also feels like a screw-up. He does not know what to expect. What will he find behind the door? He knows God invited him to the shack, but now the shack looks like a summer house. There is laughter inside, and he wonders how there can be laughter in a world where Missy is absent. This adds to his anger—how can anyone laugh in his shack, the place where Missy's blood still stains the floor?

I think the story, at this point, invites us consider who our God is and how we envision him. When we knock on the door, who is this God that answers? When God opens the door to a shamed, guilt-ridden, hopeless but compulsively driven addict (sinner), how does he greet him? Will God berate us for our failures? Will he continue the shame by shaking his finger at us and railing at us? Will God's face confirm our sense that God is disappointed with us? Will God show his disgust?

This is why I think this is a critical point in the parable. It says something about us and about who we believe God is. Will we knock? Will we seek his face? And what will God do? How will he receive us? What do we expect?

Before Mack can even knock (just as Isaiah [65:24] says “before they call I will answer,”), God—in the form of a gregarious African American woman—swings the door open and engulfs him in a loving bear hug that lifts him off the ground and spins him “around like a little child.” God greets Mack as “a long-lost and deeply-loved relative” (p. 82).

No disappointment. No shaming. No hesitation. No rebuffing. No reminders of the past. No anger. No “I told you so.” No, “What were you thinking?” Instead, an exhilarating, loving, enthusiastic “my, my, my how do I love you!” (p. 83).

When we encounter God, how will he receive us? Will he check his list of rights and wrongs? Will he evaluate us on a point system of some kind? Will he look over our record and shake his head with frustration and disappointment? I think not. Young’s parable has it right.

Intellectually and theologically I get it. I really do think God’s reception of Mack is true. But, along with Mack, it is emotionally difficult to receive it and believe it. It took Mack some time to adjust to this unexpected reception. He doubted his own joy at times even as Papa spoke with him. I, too, still hesitate at times.

I grew up with an angry God for the most part; at least I heard it that way. He was the God who zapped Uzzah for touching the ark, killed Nadab and Abihu over something as small as where they got fire for the altar, and threw Adam and Eve out of the Garden over a piece of fruit. My simplistic hearing of those stories fired my fear of a God who was always looking for my mistakes and ready (even eager!) to give me what I deserve. He was, in my young imagination, Zeus ready to fling thunderbolts at those who displeased him.

I also grew up with a God whose approval I sought; at least I heard it that way. The little boy in me saw God as one to please in order to gain his approval. I performed to please this God; I sought his applause and his delight. If I could do enough, then he would be pleased with me. If I did it right, he would applaud me. It was a kind of religious perfectionism. Add that with workaholicism, and you have one tired dude running all over the world looking for Papa’s approval. That was (is?) me.

Young's parable offers a different picture—a God who deeply loves us and is delighted to be with us. I already knew it intellectually, but emotionally I needed to feel it in my gut. I need to know—to know in ways beyond mere cognition, reaching deep within my soul, my shack—that God delights in me and yearns to give me a big ole' bear hug. I need to know that God is “especially fond” of me even when my performance is not “good enough.” I need to feel deep down within me that God already delights in me and that I don't need to seek his approval. Young's thrilling picture of Mack's encounter with God provides an image—a relational picture—that I can hang my emotional hat on.

Even more...God is already present in my shack waiting for me to show up, waiting for me to be my true self. When I come to my shack, and when you go to yours, God is already there. He is waiting to renew, sustain, enjoy and pursue relationship with us. We find ourselves, even in the shack, right where we were designed to be—in the center of God's circle of relational, triune love (p. 111).

Ultimately, Mack leaves the shack with a “Triune shine.” He comes to know that all his “best treasures are now hidden in” the Triune God rather than in his little tin box with Missy's picture (p. 236). His encounter with the Triune God has filled his emptiness and his dark horrifying nightmares have now become colorful, vibrant dreams.

The “Triune Shine” is what I call that deep recognition that I am loved by the Father, filled with his Spirit, and live in the life of the Son. The “Triune Shine” is the joy of living in a circle of relationship with Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu.

When we recognize the powerlessness of our shacks (we can't fix it ourselves), accept that God is already present in our shacks to restore us to sanity, and we choose to embrace that relationship by surrendering to that love, our shacks become log cabins (maybe even mansions).

12-steppers will recognize that last paragraph as their first three steps into spiritual recovery. It is a long journey; it is not a quick fix. But it is a divine promise.

Chapter Six

Living in a Colorless World

*Even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.*

Psalm 139:12 (TNIV)

The first time I encountered the phrase “*The Great Sadness*” in *The Shack* it immediately resonated with me. I knew exactly what my own Great Sadness was though I did not as yet know what Mack’s was or what Young’s own personal sadness was.

My Great Sadness, like Mack’s, colored everything in my life. It touched every aspect of my being—the way I looked at the world, the way I experienced life. It sapped the color out of life and turned everything to a dingy grey and, at times, an “inky darkness,” as *The Shack* describes so well. The Great Sadness tints our vision with shades of grey and black rather than with bright, vibrant, and life-affirming colors (p. 196). It sees the world through tinted windows. It is like living life with sunglasses permanently attached to our eyes. It is worse than blinding; it distorts the goodness of God.

Mack’s Great Sadness is his missing, and presumed dead, daughter Missy. For Paul Young, the author, Missy is a metaphor for his murdered childhood innocence; it is his wounded child. His Great Sadness is lost innocence and unhealed childhood wounds.

My own Great Sadness is the cumulative experience of the deaths of my wife, son, and second marriage. To many I have given the appearance of strength and joy. But I now realize that was mostly a façade. It was an unintentional deception. I had built a Hollywood front around my Great Sadness. It is easier to put up a veneer than to deal with the real hurt and pain that goes so deep that you can’t imagine ever being rid of it. It is easier to deceive yourself into thinking that grief has been resolved than to actually live through it.

The Great Sadness shapes how life is lived. It becomes our “closest friend;” it is darkness (Psalm 88:18). I hid that darkness deep within me, giving no one—not even my wife—access to the hurt. It hurt too much to speak it. In addition, to

acknowledge the pain would shatter my heroic self-image, my assumed identity. But instead of heroism the Great Sadness had become, like for Mack (p. 170), my identity as I lost joy in my inner soul and propped up the image of a superman, the great comforter.

While I have no doubt that God worked through me in ways beyond my imagination to help others, I now know that I did not deal with my own grief in healthy ways. It seemed easier to ignore, numb, or escape the feelings of grief than to live through them. Mack's journey, paralleling my own in many ways, is the story of dealing with grief and anger in ways that erect a barrier between God and himself as well as between himself and others. The Great Sadness prevented intimacy.

My Great Sadness stalled my spiritual growth; honestly, it more than stalled it, it diminished it. And, in February 2008, I crashed emotionally. I, like Mack, was "stuck" (p. 161) in emotionless silent grief and anger (p. 64). It was an anger toward God as well as myself, perhaps mostly at myself. I was not living up to my own self-image; I was not honest with my own pain. Instead of seeking spiritual nourishment, I performed. I thought that would do it. I thought excelling would heal the grief, soothe the anger, and get God and I on the same page. But my performance was an escape; it was a religious addiction, it was workaholism. I was running from my grief rather than living through it.

I was, in fact, holding back the tears; I was ashamed of tears. *The Shack* renewed an appreciation for tears. The waterfall near the shack is a symbol for tears (p. 167). Tears can "drain away" the pain and replace it with relief (p. 173); they are God's gift to cry "out all the darkness" (p. 236). The Holy Spirit collects tears and they become part of God's own heart (p. 84). Indeed, the Father himself weeps with us and sheds his own tears (pp. 92, 95). God, as Young rightly pictures it, is "fully available to take [our] pain into [himself]" (p. 107). That is the empathetic, redemptive, atoning love of God.

My first experience with Great Sadness was Sheila's death. I was devastated. Our dreams, hopes and plans for the future were gone in a single moment. It was a sudden tear in my universe that left me, seemingly, nothing. The future would be totally unlike the past; the future would be totally different than what we had planned and what I had anticipated.

Since February 2008 I have focused my personal and spiritual energy on living through my past grief traumas—to relive them in order to better integrate them

into my psyche, my soul and reset my response to those events. A vivid memory that focuses my trauma is the conclusion of Sheila's funeral. After a lengthy visitation period and funeral, I was practically carried out of the church building on the shoulders of family. As we walked out the front door of the building the whole town of Ellijay, Georgia, it seemed, was there watching, including the choir of Potter Christian School from Bowling Green, Kentucky. I felt utterly embarrassed. Everyone saw my grief; everyone saw my "weakness." I felt exposed, vulnerable. This has had a profound affect on my subsequent grief—more than I would really care to admit.

I don't know how many share that sense of embarrassment with me or if I am the only one but it was real for me. My embarrassment at grieving so deeply, so openly, and so despondently was perhaps rooted in my lack of experience in grieving, perhaps in the church's lack of modeling grief, perhaps in my own personality, perhaps in my inexperience with biblical laments, perhaps in the cultural image of "big boys don't cry," perhaps in a faulty theology of hope ("she is in a better place, so don't cry"), perhaps a false sense of what male strength is, perhaps in my father's own emotional distance, perhaps.... Well, there are many reasons and perhaps all of them have an element of truth.

I know, however, that experience has shaped me in unconscious ways. It has prevented, to some degree, deep grieving in other losses—at least public grief. I have avoided grief rather than fully embracing it. Despite my intellectual knowledge of grief, lament and tears, I had not let myself fully grieve. I did not let myself cry. I wanted to avoid the embarrassment as well as the pain. I did not want to live through that grief again; I did not want to feel it since I knew how awful it was.

I am grateful that in the last fifteen years or so the church has increasingly acknowledged the function, role and need of communal lament. As lament is taught, modeled and experienced, the kind of embarrassment that I felt on May 2, 1980 is less likely and the opportunities to fully experience grief are enlarged. When the community laments, we grievers do not feel so alone.

I am handling that embarrassment better now—partly because I am grieving, partly because I have immersed myself in the biblical laments in the past ten years, partly because I have sat with others in their grief, partly because I also see the love with which that community surrounded me at that funeral—but it is an image that lingers in my mind in subtle ways. I think embarrassment is part of

my past now rather than my present but it has shaped me and is part of the material of my shack.

Psalm 6, though primarily about physical healing, is a text I read through the lens of psychological and emotional healing. I hear myself in that prayer; I hear the yearnings of my own heart. "I am sick at heart," the Psalmist sings, "I am worn out from sobbing. All night I flood my bed with weeping, drenching it with my tears." Those tears, however, are a defense. They send evil away because "the Lord has heard my weeping" (Psalm 6:3a, 6, 8b).

Tears are wonderful healers; they are divine gifts. Tears release emotional stress. Biochemically, tears of grief release chemicals that have accumulated in the stress. These tears have a different chemical composition than other kinds of tears. Grief tears release physiological, psychological and spiritual toxicity. They are God's gift to process the hurt of a painful world.

Psalm 6 reminds us that tears are healthy. They are not an embarrassment though I have often held back the tears because I feared them. Instead, tears are part of healing and God collects them in his own heart (Psalm 56:8). Those who live through tears will reap the joy of healing (Psalm 126:6).

Chapter Seven

Stuck in the Great Sadness

My spirit is broken...

*My eyes have grown dim with grief;
my whole frame is but a shadow.*

Job 17:1a, 7 (TNIV)

The Great Sadness was Mack's "constant companion" which wore on him like a heavy quilt that "stooped his shoulders" (pp. 24-25). He felt it in his chest as it squeezed the joy out of life. It was so present that the sadness "lurked just beneath the surface of every conversation" between Nan and Mack (p. 20). The sadness so permeated Mack's heart that even as he cooked with Papa and walked with Jesus it was still with him (pp. 101-102, 113-114).

Mack was "stuck" in the sadness. He could not shake it. It would not relent.

One of the more significant points *The Shack* raises is what fuels the Great Sadness when we are stuck in it. Why does it continue? Why does it sink in deeper? Why does it become an identity rather than an experience endured? These questions are pursued in one of the more outstanding chapters in *The Shack*, "Here Come Da Judge."

Mack encounters Sophia, the Wisdom of God. Just as in Proverbs 8, God's wisdom is personified as a woman. Sophia invites Mack to sit in the judge's chair. Mack will decide how to run the world. The dialogue is analogous to Job's encounter with God in Job 38-42 and presumably Young wants us to draw the link. As God questioned Job, so Sophia questions Mack. Though Mack sits as judge—because this is what he has presumed himself to be in his anger—Sophia questions him about love, blame, and punishment.

The dialogue reveals the underlying problem. Sadness is never supposed to be an "identity." When the Great Sadness becomes our identity rather than just part of our experience, we get stuck in the Sadness instead of living through it. It becomes our "identity" because it consumes our experience, it becomes the sum total of our experience, and it colors everything we are, believe, know, and hope. It affects the way we love and our ability to love.

Then the question comes. Sophia asks what “fuels” the Sadness. She answers her own question with a rhetorical one, “That God cannot be trusted?” (p. 161). Rather than trust God, Mack blamed God. This is the critical juncture; this is the orienting choice humans make. This is how we get “stuck.”

We do not trust—at a deeply emotional level—that God really is good. We do not trust—with our heart as much as our head—that God really loves us. We do not trust—with our gut—that God has a purpose for his world, for our own children, for us. We doubt that every story participates in God’s Grand Purpose and that his interest in everyone’s story (even Missy’s or Joshua’s) is good, loving, and meaningful.

This lack of trust prevents us from fully living in the present because we regret our past or fear our future. As we wait for the “next shoe to drop” or live with the guilt of the past, we cannot immerse ourselves in the joy of the present. Like many, including the fictional Mack (p. 141) and the real Paul Young, I have lived much of my life in the past or the future rather than the present. When we live in the past or future we live in fear rather than trust. I am only now truly learning to live in the present, to live one day at a time.

I have learned that Jesus is right. It is rather annoying to finally learn something you should have figured out long ago. My “head” seemed to always escape into the future--planning what I will say, what I will do, what I will write, and how I will play the “hero.” The day was not sufficient to itself--I had to live in the future to avoid the present pain. I avoided the pain by investing my energies in the future rather than living through the evil (pain) of the day. Jesus’ caution is now more real to me than it has been in the past. “Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34b).

“One day at a time” is my new mantra. Oh, I’ve known it, spoken it, advised it, but rarely lived it. And I don’t think I have ever known exactly what it meant in practical terms, at least in my own life. I’m only beginning to understand and live it now.

Jesus calls us to live in the present--to experience the present without worry or fear of the future. The present is all I really have and if I want to look life in the eye, I must live life today. I must live “in the now.” To live one day at a time is to pray for and receive our “daily” bread without living in our tomorrows with anxiety. To avoid grief—to avoid the present experience of grief—is to circumvent God’s healing process by escaping it, numbing it or attempting to

transcend it by some kind of heroism or avoidance mechanism rather than living through the pain.

Living in the past or future is largely driven by fear—fear of past secrets, hurts and pains or future ones. As Jesus tells Mack, “your imagination of the future, which is almost always dictated by fear of some kind, rarely, if ever, pictures me there with you” (p. 142). The future without God is indeed bleak and no wonder fear dominates when we live in the future.

Jesus then said to Mack, “You try and play God, imagining the evil you fear becoming reality, and then you try and make plans and contingencies to avoid what you fear.” Mack asked, “So why do I have so much fear in my life?” “Because you don’t believe,” Jesus responded. “To the degree that those fears have a place in your life,” Jesus continued, “you neither believe I am good nor know deep in your heart that I love you” (p. 142).

Exactly! We neither trust God’s goodness nor his love. I have said it before, written it (*Yet Will I Trust Him*), and have known it in my head, but it had not sunk deep into my heart, into my emotional being, into my gut. The baggage of my life, for the most part, prevented God’s love from fully saturating my soul.

This, for me, has been the value of *The Shack*. It has given me powerful emotional imagery to explore my grief, recognize my own “shack,” embrace the reality of God’s love at a new level, and see beyond the Sadness. God has used this story to connect me more fully, more deeply with his Story.

Embracing the distinction between the Great Sadness as our identity and the Great Sadness as an experience through which we live is important for getting “unstuck.” Living one day at a time allows us to experience the sadness without getting stuck in it as it alleviates our fear of the future. But learning to trust is the positive action that prevents identifying the sadness with our core.

Papa feels the sadness too. Papa weeps (p. 92). Jesus weeps and Sarayu collects tears. But this does not become their identity. Rather, love is their identity. Because they love, they feel the sadness but the sadness does not supplant love as the core experience of the Father, Son and Spirit. They are love.

In the telescoped telling of this parable the burden of Mack’s Great Sadness is lifted. Mack no longer considers it part of his identity (169-170, 247). What

happened? Mack came to believe—to truly trust—that despite his tragic experiences God really does love him and Missy.

When we learn to trust that God really loves us, when we know that we are beloved, we can feel the sadness without it becoming our identity. Love is our identity, not the Great Sadness. God is love and we are created in the image of God.

For years when I thought of Sheila's funeral I could only see the embarrassment, tears, grief and pain. The fog of the Great Sadness colored everything grey so that I could not see the love present there. I could not see the love of the children from Potter Children's Home who came to sing at the funeral, I could not see the love of my parents and siblings, I could not see the love the Pettit family (my in-laws) had for me as if I were their own son (and to this day they still call me "son"), I could not see the love of my best man who came at great expense from Oklahoma to stand beside me at the grave (thanks Bruce!), I could not see.... The list could go on.

Great Sadness distorts the goodness and love of God. It blinds us to love. The fog creates distrust and fear. But the love of God is nevertheless present in the Great Sadness. God was with Missy. God is present in our shacks. God was present at Sheila's funeral. God wept with me.

Surrounded by love, God spoke a word into my heart that day that I can only now begin to hear: "You are my beloved."

Chapter Eight

Gardening with God

*The Lord will guide you always, he will satisfy your need...
You will be like a well-watered garden,
like a spring whose waters never fail.*

Isaiah 58:11 (TNIV)

The garden that rests beside the shack in Mack's vision represents Mack's own heart, his soul. It is a chaotic mess but beautiful, and, more importantly, tended by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, speaking for the Triune community, the Spirit assures Mack that it is also "*our garden*" (p. 232). There is hope for the mess because God works in this garden; it is his garden too! To God it is not a mess but a "living fractal" (p. 138—view some images of fractals on the internet to grasp their chaotic but inspiring beauty). It has meaning, significance, beauty, and purpose.

Young paints a picture of Sarayu and Mack gardening together. They are pulling up weeds and tending the garden. The Spirit, doing the lion's share of the work, cooperates with Mack in beautifying the garden. Together they prepare ground for a new planting. They dig up the roots that will "harm the seed [they] will plant" (p. 133). It is a seedling that Mack will soon lay into the ground himself with the help of the Triune God.

Amidst the "chaos in color" (p. 128), however, there is a "wound in the garden" (131). It is Mack's pain, his Great Sadness. This is the area that the Spirit and Mack worked to prepare for fresh plantings...for healing.

Young offers a wonderful picture of the somatic (using the physical body) and psychodramatic endurance of grief. Papa leads Mack to the body of his daughter, Mack weeps for her, and carries her back to the garden for burial. Mack buries her in his heart—in the ground prepared by the Spirit, with a casket made by the carpenter Jesus, and in the loving embrace of the Father. It is a pure act of love. With their presence, the garden blossoms with the beauty of Missy's life and God's heart.

Mack's encounter with the Triune God gave him perspective. He sees his life as a garden tended by God. Through his story-telling and his own recovery, Young

is able to “become the child he never was allowed to be” and abide “in simple trust and wonder” (pp. 246-47).

The power of psychodrama is that it brings body and soul into relation with unresolved trauma or grief. It is not merely cognitive (thinking), but it is somatic (done with your body) and communal (done with other people). When there is unresolved trauma in our unconscious, we revert back to that trauma when we are triggered by an analogous experience. We then react to the present trigger as if we are again experiencing the original trauma. Consequently, we tend to intensify feelings which may not be appropriate to the situation or transfer feelings from the past event to the present. The present does not necessarily warrant those feelings and is thus confuses people in relationship with us. Grievors, then, tend to withdraw emotionally in order to protect themselves from those horrendous feelings.

On November 14, 2007, my good friend and colleague at Lipscomb University Mike Matheny died after a three year struggle with a brain tumor. Mike—we were the same age at the time (50)—is a dear friend. We talked often about our great loves--the Psalms and baseball. He is (even now!) a Yankee fan; I am a Cubs fan. But we are both fans of the lament Psalms. We both prayed those laments and we both taught Psalms at Lipscomb. I miss him terribly but I imagine that he even now stands with the saints around the throne of God in both praise ("worthy is the Lamb," Revelation 5) and lament ("how long, O Lord", Revelation 6).

Mike's death was a traumatic trigger for me. The last time I visited Mike it was as if I was with my son Joshua in his last days. Mike and Joshua were both in hospice, incapacitated, and nonverbal. My time with Mike was a psychological reversion to the trauma of Joshua's death which was then a reversion to Sheila's death. It was as if I was at Joshua's bedside as well as Mike's, as if I was again being carried out of Sheila's funeral. My gut took me there because those grief traumas were yet unresolved.

In the wake of that reversion, I shut down emotionally. Even my funeral sermon at Mike's service was devoid of emotion. I did not want to feel that pain. It was a pain with which I was all too familiar—it was my Great Sadness, and my way of dealing with it was to withdraw and numb my feelings. Not feeling the pain was, it seemed to me, better than feeling the pain. I did not realize what I was doing to myself.

I thought I had resolved my grief and even believed I was relatively healthy, but I was actually deceiving myself. I was playing the "hero" again. A hero, of course, cannot let himself be embarrassed by tears or uncontrolled grief. He must hide it with laughter and avoid intense conversations about it.

The hero must be strong and model how to handle life's tragedies. But I am no hero. To the contrary, instead of living through my grief, I avoided it. I tried to jump over my grief and leap—like superman—over tall buildings in a single bound.

I am now grateful that my leap was actually a crash, and the crash has become a moment of divine grace, a divine awakening. Hitting the wall of unresolved trauma has given me the opportunity to truly experience my grief—to revisit, relive and reconstruct the meaning of my grief, to re-enter the world of lament and truly feel what has become a journey of authentic healing. And for this I am grateful and grateful for the people God has put into my life who have supported me, showed me grace and modeled redemptive love.

Psychodrama, in my experience, provided a way to re-experience the past trauma in a safe environment in order to reconfigure its meaning. Psychodrama confronts the past in a concrete somatic (bodily) and spiritual experience so that we symbolically but nevertheless authentically relive the past trauma. This confrontation undermines attempts to flee (escape) from the trauma, fight the trauma with intensified feelings or freeze (numb) our feelings. While those strategies protect us in the initial moments of grief, if we get stuck in any one of them then the unresolved trauma will negatively affect our sense of peace and relationships with others.

Psychodrama resolves trauma by reorganizing a memory. By entering the past trauma through role play, one is able to gain perspective and assign new meaning to the experience. It is another way of bringing emotional "closer" to an experience. The drama creates a new narrative—it is a redoing of the past through undoing the past. It gives us a chance for a "do over." The new narrative provides a new frame of reference for drawing meaning from the event as we reconstruct the past with new awareness, perspective and insight.

Through one psychodrama I re-experienced the grief of Sheila's funeral. It opened again for me the floodgates of tears which I had unconsciously held in reserve through numbing and withdrawal.

When Papa led Mack to Missy's body and Mack carried her body back to the garden for burial, this was a psychodramatic act which allowed Mack to retell the story of Missy's death. This time it was framed by Triune love, empathy and care. This time it was experienced in the daylight of the garden rather than in the darkness of the Great Sadness. There were still tears—it was still sad, but the tears were shared and then wiped by a divine presence which Mack trusted and loved.

Mack was no longer "stuck" in his Great Sadness.

Chapter Nine

The Eyes of Jesus

The Lord turned around and looked straight at Peter.

Luke 22:61 (GNB)

One of the most vivid scenes in the Gospel of Luke is Peter's three denials, particularly "the look."

The verbs are intensive, descriptive and full of significance. "Turned around" involved twisting or reversing; it is turning the back 180 degrees. Jesus turned around—he "converted" as the term is sometimes translated—to look at Peter. But it was no mere glance; it was an intense gaze. Jesus looked at Peter with piercing, discerning eyes.

Turning his body toward Peter, the Lord's eyes rested on Peter.
(JMH amplified).

The next verbs in Luke 22:61-62 describe Peter's response. He "remembered" what Jesus had predicted about the denial... "he went and wept bitterly." Confronted with his betrayal, Peter "remembered." He then escaped; he ran away. And then he wailed violently—a visible, audible, wrenching sob. Peter, faced with his denial and memory, was a totally broken person. Remembering Jesus' prediction—and, no doubt, his own insistence that it would never happen—he burst into tears.

What did Peter see in the eyes of Jesus that pierced his heart? What did those eyes tell him?

What did Mack expect to see behind the door of his shack? What kind of God did he expect to meet? Would God look angrily at him? Accusingly? Shamefully? Or would those eyes express love, peace and forgiveness?

What did Peter see in the eyes of Jesus?

I think how we answer that question will probably say more about our own vision of God than it would Peter's. We can't get inside of Peter's head, but we can examine our own. Our root image of God—perhaps one we learned in

childhood, one that is at the core of our inner being—will probably shape how we "feel" this text.

We can easily imagine what Peter felt. No doubt he felt shame and guilt. We have all felt the same when confronted with our sins or our angry outbursts. That shame and guilt taps into something deep within us, and our core understanding of God will shape how we deal with it.

For some the eyes of Jesus may be primarily condemning. Peter sinned; he did not measure up. He did not keep the law; he betrayed a friend. The law condemns him, and Jesus condemns him. At the root of this perception is an angry God, a judge who strictly administers the law without mercy. Jesus, with these eyes, is insulted and offended. "How dare Peter deny me! I thought he was my friend! Didn't he say he would go to the death with me! He deserves whatever he gets!"

This God is the Zeus who sits on the throne ready to fling his lightning bolts at those who deserve his vengeance. These eyes convey no hope, no redemption. Unfortunately, they are the eyes that many have lived with for years, even when intellectually they know the story of grace much better than their guts will let them feel. It is what some got from their parents—a series of spankings, condemnations. They heard the message that they were bad kids and deserved punishment. Or they have met those eyes in the faces of church people, yes, Christians. Are these the eyes that met Peter's eyes?

For others the eyes of Jesus may be primarily filled with disappointment. Peter disappointed Jesus; he had hoped for better. Peter knew better; he knew he should not deny his Lord, but he did nevertheless. Peter had expectations of himself. Even if everyone else ran away, he would not. He would die with Jesus if necessary. The disappointed eyes are the opposite of what Peter wanted. He wanted approval, praise, and honor. To feel Jesus' disappointment meant he was seeking Jesus' commendation.

Commendation is what we often seek from parents as children; we don't want to disappoint our parents. Some parents, when disappointed, shame their children. "I knew you couldn't do it. Why can't you be like Johnny? When will you ever learn? Do I have to do everything myself? I can't trust you with anything. I'll have to finish what you started." We tend to project this onto God so that he becomes like the shaming parent who voices disapproval, disappointment and dissatisfaction. Are these the eyes that met Peter's eyes?

At my core, my childhood images--images that I learned but surely few, if any, ever intentionally taught me--tend to see the eyes of an angry, disappointed God. My sin gave me a toxic shame that meant that I was worthless, a mistake, a screw-up (like Mack felt). I needed to get God's approval, to get on his good side. I wanted God to like me and certainly not punish me. So, I needed to work harder, better, faster...to do more, to do enough.

Intellectually, I know that last paragraph is bogus. Emotionally, however, it has been a different story. And so when I worked my way to a hellacious screw-up—working for what I thought God wanted but actually working myself to death, even a spiritual death—I immediately felt God's disappointment. "John Mark, you should've known better." Or, "John Mark, how could you?!" Or, "John Mark, what were you thinking?"

But what did Peter see in the eyes of Jesus?

I don't think he saw condemning, judgmental eyes. Neither do I think he saw disappointed eyes. I think he saw sadness, a compassionate and hopeful sadness. Jesus grieved for Peter. His eyes expressed sympathy and caring. They were redemptive eyes. Jesus is more interested in relationship with Peter than excluding, punishing or shaming him. Jesus is the divine loving brother who grieves over the failures and hurts of his siblings but does not give up on them. Peter saw in Jesus' eyes his ongoing compassionate, forgiving, loving prayer that Peter would be strengthened by this experience and the hope in his eyes was the assurance that indeed Peter would.

In our betrayals, our sins, our denials, what do we see in the eyes of Jesus? With Peter we will remember and weep bitterly. That is understandable and healthy. But also with Peter may we gain strength through the compassionate redemptive hope in Jesus' eyes.

Mack asked Papa: "honestly, don't you enjoy punishing those who disappoint you?" Papa "turned toward Mack" and with "deep sadness in her eyes," said: "I am not who you think I am, Mackenzie. I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it" (pp. 119-120).

I think Paul Young got that right. Intellectually, I understand it. Emotionally, well, I'm still learning.

Jesus' eyes, though sad, anticipated the joy of redemption for Peter....and for me...for all of us.

Chapter Ten

Forgiving Others

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Ephesians 4:32 (TNIV)

Forgiveness is just beneath the surface in the first half of Young's parable. By the end it becomes central to Mack's healing. Our shacks only become mansions through the grace of forgiveness. Without forgiveness—both receiving and giving—our shacks will remain broken. Without forgiveness—both receiving and giving—we are “stuck” in the Great Sadness.

Mack thought he had come to the end of his spiritual journey at the moment he finally learned to trust Papa (p. 222). Trust develops when we learn to enjoy the circle of God's Triune loving relationship. Mack had arrived, or so he thought.

Papa took Mack on a “healing trail,” but it was not just about Missy's body. It was about something much deeper and much more difficult. If Mack is going to fully experience the circle of divine love, then he must also enter into the inner circle of forgiveness. Papa says, “I want to take away one more thing that darkens your heart” (p. 223). Mack must forgive the “son of bitch who killed” his Missy (p. 224), about whom Mack had earlier said “damn him to hell” (p. 161).

I believe this is one of the more stirring sections of *The Shack* and, I think, filled with profound wisdom as well as striking statements. How do people forgive the one who murdered their child?

Giving forgiveness is exactly that—it is an act of grace, a gift. Forgiveness is not owed; it is not a debt we must pay. Forgiveness cannot be demanded, coerced, or even expected by offenders. Forgiveness is given.

At one level, forgiving is therapeutic and healthy. It does something for us and inside of us, including lowering blood pressure and decreasing heart rates. It releases negativity; it vents the poison that can corrupt our souls. It is freedom from repressed negative emotions. When we refuse to forgive we fuel a cancer that devours us. Consequently, forgiveness is something we do for ourselves. We forgive for the sake of our own mental and physical health.

But forgiveness is much more than a humanistic act of self-transformation. Forgiveness participates in the divine life. It is being with others in the way that God is with us. It is to love as God loves. When we forgive we participate in God's redemptive movement within the world; we participate in his own forgiving act. And we come to know God's love as an insider through forgiving others.

Viewed in this way, forgiveness arises out of the work of God's Spirit in our hearts. It arises out of our own experience of having received forgiveness from God, the empowerment of the Spirit to forgive as God forgives, and the sense of security and assurance that we are beloved by God no matter how others may treat us or what they think of us.

Remembering our own mistakes and sins empowers forgiveness. If God has forgiven us, then who are we to withhold forgiveness from others? Are we better than they? And, ah, that might be the very problem that hinders us....our pride, our sense of superiority, our self-righteousness.

What hinders forgiveness is our own resentment and bitterness. We humans tend to wallow in self-pity, blame everyone else for how we feel, and fail to act positively with our negative feelings. This resentment and bitterness leads to negative actions such as revenge so that we return evil for evil instead of forgiving the evil done against us.

Yet, there remains in us a deep yearning for justice, even revenge. As Mack says, "if I can't get justice, I still want revenge." Papa's response is brilliantly on point, "Mack, for you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him" (p. 224). Mack, and the reader, is reminded of an earlier scene where Sophia gloried in how "mercy triumphs over justice because of love" at the cross, and then asked Mack, "Would you instead prefer he'd chosen justice for everyone?" (pp. 164-5).

God wants to redeem even those who have wounded us and he prefers mercy for them just as he prefers it for us. Our act of forgiveness releases them to God and takes the burden off us. We can let go of resentment, bitterness, and vengeance when we leave it in God's hands. Instead of taking matters into our own hands or grabbing the offender by the throat with threats, we let go. We let go and let God handle it.

Anger becomes ungodly when it turns to revenge. When we return "evil for evil," then we become an abuser rather than the abused. When we take vengeance into our own hands, then we become judge, jury, and executioner...we become God.

Are we still angry about the wounds? Yes! Anger, for example, is certainly a healthy response toward abuse. Papa says, "anger is the right response to something that is so wrong." "But," he continues, "don't let the anger and pain and loss you feel prevent you from forgiving him and removing your hands from around his neck" (p. 227). Forgiving someone does not excuse their actions, but it does release them from our judgment and places them in God's hands who will handle justice in his world. Forgiveness means that we are no longer vindictive, seeking to do the other harm. We no longer take them by the throat but hand them over to God.

Yet, when we have experienced hurt through the offense of another, anger is a natural and healthy response. There is nothing ungodly about a rape victim's anger toward their assailant. There is nothing ungodly about an abused wife's anger toward her husband. There is nothing ungodly about anger toward one's sexual abuser. Part of the process of forgiveness may, in fact, involve confronting the other person with what they have done. Forgiveness does not mean that what the other person did is OK, but it does give the forgiver space to be OK about their past.

Forgiveness doesn't seem fair, does it? That is the joy of receiving it....and the difficulty of giving it. None of us wants fairness when we are receiving forgiveness but we tend to want our "pound of flesh" before giving it. In forgiving we not only release the offender to the judgment of God, we also release ourselves from the weight of resentment which is too heavy to bear and will only sour the sweetness in our lives. Resentment is a poison we ingest while expecting the other person to die. It only harms the one who harbors the resentment.

Actually resentment and bitterness arise out of our own woundedness, out of our Great Sadness. Life has wounded all of us—we have been betrayed, neglected, and attacked by others and even (as it may seem) by God. As a result we want to protect ourselves, rely on our own self-sufficiency, and blame everyone else rather than take responsibility for our lives. Thus, we resent others when they hurt us. We resent rather than forgive because this is how we think others have treated us. Our negative self-image, developed through childhood and other life

experiences, yields a negative reaction to hurt in the form of resentment. Unchecked, this resentment leads to revenge.

How do we let go of resentment? Here is an ancient practice that may help—it is one that Papa suggested to Mack (p. 227). To forgive and let go, pray for the offender every day for a month. Every day say to God, “I forgive ‘Joe,’ and I want you to give him every blessing that I seek in my own life.” This habit—which is also suggested in the Alcoholics Anonymous “Big Book” (p. 552)—is liberating and enriching. Whenever I feel resentment, I pray for those I resent, and I pray daily for them until I feel the release...and it may take weeks...or months!

This does not mean that the forgiver must now reconcile with the forgiven. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. Forgiveness—as an act of grace toward another—can happen without reconciliation since the other may not receive the forgiveness, may not think they need forgiveness, or may not want to renew (or begin) the relationship. It only takes one to forgive but it takes two to reconcile. While forgiveness may pave the way for reconciliation, forgiveness does not necessarily lead to reconciliation and reconciliation is not required for forgiveness.

Reconciliation takes much longer than forgiveness since reconciliation involves a cooperative process of mutual understanding. That takes time, intimacy, and trust. Reconciliation assumes rebuilt trust and that is a painful, time-consuming process. Reconciliation may never come—some people never reconcile with God, for example. But reconciliation is not necessary for forgiveness.

The “miracle” of reconciliation, however, begins with the “miracle” of forgiveness. There can be no reconciliation except where the offended forgives the offender. I think the word “miracle” is appropriate because such acts are divinely enabled and are themselves participation in the divine life. We will, according to Papa, “discover a miracle” in our own hearts that allows us to build “a bridge of reconciliation” between the parties involved (p. 226). The miracle begins with God working in our hearts and not waiting for the “other person” to make the first move. The first move is forgiveness; it was God’s own first move, right?

Forgiveness does not mean the offense was insignificant or that it did not hurt or there was no reason for anger. Rather, forgiveness is our decision to let God handle the justice, to let go of the other person's throat, to let go of the

resentment, and to let go any personal desire to punish. Positively, and more significantly, forgiveness means desiring for that person what you desire for yourself and treating that person the way God treats you. In short, it is to love them, even if they—in their minds—are our enemies.

We can only love when we feel loved by God. Our acceptance of God's own forgiveness and our experience of the divine circle of love surrounds us with safety and security. We forgive out of that secure place--the place where we hear God say, "You are my beloved no matter what your past; you are loved." That love overflows into forgiveness for others.

At bottom, "to forgive is divine" (Alexander Pope).

Chapter Eleven

Forgiving Ourselves

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.

1 John 3:19-20 (NIV)

Mack has a problem with himself as well as with the murderer. He lives under the burden of self-blame and self-punishment, even self-hatred. He deserves, so he thinks, to live in the Great Sadness because he did not protect his daughter.

The Great Sadness, when we feel responsible in some way (no matter how small!), creates a self-perpetuating cycle of blame and punishment. It becomes a form of self-flagellation. We deserve the pain, so we think. How can Mack enjoy life when Missy is dead? He has no right to joy and peace. He did not protect her. Sometimes he even feels like God is punishing him because of how he treated his father as a teenager (p. 71, 164). That is the insanity into which the “Great Sadness” throws us.

Self-forgiveness is a controversial topic. Many believe it is too tied to self-help and self-esteem pop psychology and that it is actually a reflection of pride and lack of faith. There is no text in Scripture which explicitly commands self-forgiveness, so it is said, and only God can forgive. Others, however, genuinely punish themselves by denying themselves self-compassion. They feel a need for self-forgiveness and their life is stuck in cycles of guilt, depression and self-hatred. I have been stuck in that cycle myself in the past—and it still raises its ugly head on occasion.

At one level self-forgiveness, in the strictest terms, is not what we need. What we need is divine forgiveness. What some call self-forgiveness is, I believe, actually the process of accepting God's forgiveness and removing the barriers to that acceptance which burden our hearts. In this sense, I think, self-forgiveness is an expression of a biblical notion of self-love that is grounded in God's gracious forgiveness and unfailing love. But we cannot receive and feel that grace if we erect walls between God and our true selves.

How do people forgive themselves? I wish I knew. Ok, I have some ideas, but I don't know how to let it sink into my soul. I still have days where I want to beat myself up over my divorce. I still feel a deep sense of failure over it and sometimes I still feel the guilt associated with that failure even though I know in my head that God has forgiven me.

I do recognize the insanity of my occasional foray into self-affliction. My self-worth is not found in my perfection or my ability to keep the law or even in a perfect marriage. My self-worth is found in the delight God has for me. God welcomes me and is "especially fond" of me.

On one occasion when I was shaming myself for my sins, a friend asked an empowering question. "Do you believe God has forgiven you?" Yes, of course, I answered. "So, do you know something God doesn't?" I recognized the point immediately, at least intellectually. When I fail to forgive myself, I make myself god. I become the judge. Whereas God has declared me "free," I continue to bind myself to my sins. What I forgive in others and what God forgives in me, I find difficult to forgive in myself. That is nothing but arrogance and ingratitude. But it is easier said than done.

What hinders self-forgiveness? Here is a partial list and I'm sure others could add more out of their own experience. These are some reasons we find it difficult to forgive ourselves. They all fall under the broad rubric of *pride*.

- unchanged behavior—we continue the sinful behaviors even when we don't want to (which is the nature of addiction)
- given our past failures we fear that we will do them again
- burying our unresolved guilt that becomes a festering wound
- "fixing it" by doing enough good stuff to restore the balance
- perfectionism—our expectation that we are better than that; we should have know better and done better
- lack of trust in God's love as we feel unworthy of love
- no experience in grace—we have been judged by others and we habitually judge others and thus we judge ourselves
- self-anger and self-hatred over past behaviors which leads to self-punishment

If self-forgiveness is actually the acceptance of God's gracious forgiveness, then it is about relationship with God, about being with God and accepting God's love. Here is a partial list of what that might entail as we move from intellectual

acceptance of grace to the authentic experience of grace in our hearts. This will yield self-forgiveness through a healthy self-love because of what God has done.

- confess our sin to God and trust the promise of forgiveness (1 John 1:9)
- seek transformation through spiritual disciplines that instill a hope for recovery
- recognize our unrealistic perfectionistic expectations (let go of self-anger)
- mutual confession of sin in a supportive, safe community of believers
- make amends to those we have hurt
- accept responsibility for sin and its consequences (let go of "making up" for sin)
- contemplative prayer on the nature of God who is full of mercy, compassion and love
- meditation and visualization of God's word to us: "you are beloved"

Should we forgive ourselves? Yes! Not because this arises out of our own self-will, self-esteem or self-worth. Rather, we forgive ourselves because God has already forgiven us and we have accepted that forgiveness which gives us worth, joy and authentic love. We forgive ourselves because God is greater than our hearts and he has received us as one of his children whom he loves.

Our need for self-forgiveness is generated by our prideful rejection of God's forgiveness—our pride that somehow we think we know ourselves better than God does! Such pride is expressed in words like—which I have said to myself—“How can God forgive me of that when I knew better?!” After all, my mind thinks, if you really knew me, you would not forgive me either. Consequently, it is difficult for me to believe that God forgives me or that anyone else could forgive me. Yet, he does. And others have as well. This is the wonder of grace, the joy of being loved even when I feel unlovable.

Pride refuses to accept, internalize and authentically feel that love. Grace—the active, dynamic, experiential love of God—can heal woundedness if we will but open our hearts to it and let go of the pride. The movement from pride to acceptance is a process, a journey of faith, through which God heals us and transforms us into his own likeness.

So, strictly, I suppose we do not forgive ourselves but rather God forgives us. When we accept that forgiveness deep within our guts, then we can let go of the self-punishment, self-hatred and fear of failure. Then we are equipped, by God's grace, to give to others what God has given to us.

The Shack has helped me process self-forgiveness. It is rooted in trusting God's fondness for me, his forgiveness and that God finds me worth his sacrifice for the sake of enjoying my presence (p. 103).

God takes my "shack" and transforms it into a mansion. When I experience God's forgiveness at the gut level and when God's beaming joy envelops me, then I can see self-affliction as rebellion and self-forgiveness as trust. I can even see Papa smile and wink as I look myself in the mirror and say "I forgive you."

Chapter Twelve

Forgiving God

*God has wronged me...
 though I cry "I have been wronged," I get no response...
 his anger burns against me;
 he counts me among his enemies.*

Job 19:6, 7, 11 (NIV)

To forgive God is, for many, if not most, a necessary bridge to praising him. But it is a difficult concept. How does one forgive God? What does that mean? It sounds blasphemous...as if God has done something wrong that needs forgiveness. And who are we to forgive God anyway? We are the creatures, he is the creator; we are the clay, he is the potter.

Bear with me for a bit here.

Mack blames God (p. 161). He becomes the accuser, taking on the role of the accuser (Satan). He assaults the goodness and honesty of God. His anger boils against the one who did not protect Missy. Mack, it seems, must learn to "forgive" God. *The Shack* does not use this language, but the idea is present.

Forgiving God is a controversial topic among many believers, especially Christians. Jewish believers—dating back at least into the early medieval period—have a long history of talking about "forgiving God." In the aftermath of the Holocaust it has become one of the most significant questions in Jewish theology. Can believers forgive God for the death of millions and the seeming failure of his promises?

When Rabbi Kushner adopted J.B.'s position from Archibald MacLeish's modern retelling of the Job drama, he suggested that humans need to forgive God in order to move on with their lives. We need to forgive God for not making a more perfect world. After all, in Kushner's understanding, God is limited—he can't do anything about evil in the world or heal diseases. To forgive God, then, is to recognize his limitations and not expect more from him than he can deliver.

This is not, however, what I mean by "forgiving God." It is not to forgive God's limitations or his unrighteous acts. The transcendent God does not have

limitations and he is holy without any darkness. Forgiveness, in the sense of showing mercy toward an imperfection, is not applicable to God. So, what does it mean to “forgive God”?

Initially, I, too, resisted the language. But it has grown on me through the experience of life, the depth of hurt, the lament tradition in Scripture, and recognizing my own resentment towards God that ebbed and flowed with the pains of life.

“Forgiving God” means letting go of the need to judge God—it is the issue that faced Mack before Sophia. It means letting go of “getting back” at God, of brooding over the seeming unfairness of it all. That kind of resentment and bitterness not only stalls spiritual growth, it can kill it. Instead of holding a grudge against God, we let it go.

My anger with God has led to self-pity and resentment. I have, at times, felt “picked on” by God. I have railed against God with the angry but despairing cry, “This is just too much.” I understand that anger and I cannot simply pretend like it is not there (though I have tried that, stuffing it down into my soul). But anger is not the problem—anger should be vented, expressed, prayed. Rather, it is the deep mistrust that sometimes accompanies anger which turns it into resentment.

While some turn to God in praise and thanksgiving in the midst of their hurt, others turn to God in anger and lament. They are disappointed with God. Like Job, they believe (or at least it sure appears) that God has wronged them. They are frustrated with God's hidden purposes; they are irritated by seemingly meaningless pain. It depresses some and creates anxiety in everyone.

There is, of course, nothing wrong with anger and lament. It is modeled in Scripture. The Hebrew book *Job* is a dramatic lament. Half of the Psalm-worship of Israel was lament, and much of it filled with depression, anger and confusion. Even the martyred saints around the throne of God ask the classic lament question, “How long? How long?” (Revelation 6:10).

Thus, while some respond with praise and others with lament, both are appropriate and understandable. Indeed, most of those, if not all, who respond with praise also learn to lament as a healthy way of grieving. Saints often move from praise to lament and ultimately — we hope — back to praise.

However, the return to praise is not an easy road. It is filled with potholes and stalked by robbers. Some, including myself, turn to bitterness rather than back to praise for seasons of time. In this bitterness we dwell in our resentment. We project onto God all the inner demons of our own souls. We blame God for all the hurt and pain in our lives. We envy those who have it better; we resent the God who would permit our pain. We doubt, question and wonder why.

Stuck in bitterness, some ultimately reject God. They move from faith to doubt to unbelief. They rebel against and curse the God they once trusted. I believe this move from bitterness to unbelief is ultimately driven by our own inner woundedness, perhaps our own unresolved anger and alienation. When we project our "stuff" (parental abandonment or whatever it might be) onto God, then we make a God in the image of our woundedness or even equate God with our woundedness. And who wants that kind of God? It is better to live without that God than to live with that one.

Forgiving God is my language for that process that moves us from bitterness back to praise. Perhaps "forgiving God" is not the best language to use—it is subject to misunderstanding. But "forgiveness," at its heart, is release. To forgive God is to let go of the resentment, to let go of God's throat and our demand that he treat us as we think we deserve (which, by the way, is a dangerous thing to demand of God—do we really want what we deserve?!).

Acceptance is the key. To accept our reality, that is, to live life on its own terms, to take life as it comes, is necessary for comfort and peace in the midst of tragic circumstances. This acceptance is generated by trusting God.

Trusting God arises out of contemplating his greatness—he is God, not me. It arises out of contemplating his sovereignty—he is in control, not me. It arises out of contemplating his wisdom—he knows better than I. But, most importantly, this trust arises out of contemplating his faithful love—I am beloved by God. I will not trust a God who does not love me, but convinced that God loves me more than I love myself I will trust that God. And this is the God of Jesus—the God who gave himself for our sakes.

When I trust God, I can forgive him. When I trust God, I can accept my reality. I can let go of control and power. I can let go of my pride that believes that I could run the world much better than him. I can let go of judgment and accept the truth of my circumstances. But my acceptance is contingent upon trusting God's

love for me and his sovereign purposes. And trust is learned—knowing the Story, living the Story, and experiencing the Story through God's people.

This trusting acceptance is forgiveness—it releases us from our own resentments, bitterness and self-inflicted wounds. Forgiveness then empowers us to praise God once again, and through praise we experience transformation.

This has been my experience. When hurt and pained, I lament (sometimes with anger). My lament can easily turn to bitterness and resentment. But recalling the Story of God in Jesus, seeking the face of God, and trusting his love for me, I accept (to one degree or another) my lot and release the resentment. Forgiving God, I learn again to praise him.

Only recently have I realized that this is a constant cycle in my life. Something triggers me and the cycle begins again. But, I trust and hope, it is a spiral toward transformation rather than a degenerative plunge into unbelief.

When Mack blamed God, resented him, and was willing to simply give up on God (Mack: "I'm done, God" [p. 80]), it was because of his basic distrust of God's goodness and purposes. When trust re-enters his soul, he lets go of the blame-game; he lets go of the resentment. This is "forgiving" God.

Trust conquers fear; faith triumphs over resentment; and love does not blame.

Chapter Thirteen

Forgiving God: A Testimony

A heart of peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the bones.

Proverbs 14:30 (TNIV)

One Saturday evening in 2008 my wife and I attended a 5th-8th talent show at the Lipscomb Campus School in Nashville, Tennessee. It was almost three hours long; yes, that long.

About thirty minutes into the program, I began to feel uncomfortable.

Something was gnawing at me. My insides were pushing me to run, to get out of the building, to find a way to excuse myself. Something was telling me that if I could just go home I could regain my serenity. And, a year previous that is probably what I would have done, but that serenity would have been an illusion, an escape.

This night, however, I turned inward. The problem was not the program but something going on inside of me. As the program proceeded, I began to meditate, calm myself and pray. I wanted to know what was really going on with me. The kids were doing their best, and they weren't so bad that I needed to escape—some of them were actually very good. There was something else from which I wanted to escape. I needed to sit in my feelings, discern what was happening, and feel my way through the mess that is my soul.

As I meditated, I became aware that I was envious. I did not envy the children. I envied the parents. I noticed that I was agitated by their joy and the wonder of their eyes. I was particularly annoyed by how much the family behind me was enjoying their star's performance. They, of course, did not cause my anxiety. Rather, my own woundedness was generating it. This was not about them, but about me.

Envy. Not envious of talent, money, power, job, but envious that these parents were blessed by God to watch their children perform. I was never able to do that with Joshua. When he was the age of these children, he was in a wheelchair, could barely walk, and spent most of his time unaware of his surroundings.

Judgment too! Did these parents really fully enjoy what their kids were doing? Did they understand how blessed they were?

From six to sixteen my family watched Joshua slowly die. I never saw Joshua play a team sport, never saw him perform on a stage, never saw him read a poem or read at all! I never even saw him color between the lines. I envied the parents and begrudged their joy, and—in my harsh and unkind judgment—wondered whether they truly appreciated their blessing.

But that was not the root. Resentment was the root of my feeling that night; that was my discomfort—my need for escape. I wanted to run away so I would not have to think about my pain, Joshua's illness and death. I did not want to acknowledge my resentment. I would rather not think about it or feel it. It is easier to simply escape, to flee.

I did not resent the parents. I resented God. He blessed these children, but not Joshua. He gave these gifts to these parents, but I was never able to enjoy those gifts with Joshua. Presumably they had prayed for healthy children, so had I!

I had missed out and there was no one to blame except God. Is he not responsible for his world? Did we not pray that we would have a healthy son? Why did he say, "No, he won't be healthy"? I resent that answer, I protest it, and sometimes I'm not sure that I can put up with a God like that.

Even as I write these words I know I received many gifts from Joshua and they were divine blessings. Even as I think again about his broken body, I still remember his smile, his laugh and the joy of just sitting him on my lap in my big chair watching one of his favorite movies (*The Wizard of Oz*). I realize I was blessed, but that Saturday evening I resented that God had not blessed me more richly—that he had not blessed me like those parents in that auditorium that night.

As I meditated on that resentment, I noted my feelings. Irritation. Frustration. Anger. Envy. Jealousy. Resentment. And I took them to God. I told him how I felt. I let it out so I could let it go, so I could release it into God's hands. I needed to be heard...by God! And in being heard, I could let go...at least for that night. In that moment I could forgive God.

In letting go, I could remember the blessings I did receive through Joshua. I could treasure those and hold them in my heart. And I could thank God for

them. I could value the experiences—the learning and growth experienced in the process. I could even see God in many of those painful moments—God present to comfort in my laments, God present through people who served my family, God present in laughter as well as tears.

That night—at least for that night—I forgave God. In releasing my resentment, I was given some peace and joy. Bit by bit, day by day, little by little, the comfort is renewed and joy returns.

Thanks be to God for his patience with me. Even when I bitterly resent him, he loves me, he graciously receives my forgiveness (which, of course, he does not need it!), and he is not frustrated with me when the resentment returns on a cold Saturday night in December seven and a half years after Joshua's death.

Thank you, Yahweh. Truly, your loving kindness endures for ever.

Chapter Fourteen

Designed for Intimacy

He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is crushed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch."

Mark 14:33-34 (TNIV)

The Great Sadness changed Mack. Previous to it he was friendly and though he was mostly superficial in his conversations he was nevertheless engaged with the world around him. But the Great Sadness changed that.

Mack became more and more isolated. He stopped going to church (for the most part) and no longer hung out with his long-time friend Willie. He no longer looked anyone in the eye. The hurt, shame and darkness of the Great Sadness burdened him. He was emotionally shut down and shut off from everyone else.

Great sadness has the tendency to isolate people and those burdened with it have a tendency to withdraw – physically, emotionally and spiritually. They become loners in their inner souls as no one is permitted to enter, see or know their shacks.

But Mack's experience with Papa, Jesus and Sarayu changed that. We see it in the way he talks with Jesus. As he walks with Jesus, Mack talks about his fears, tears and cheers. They walk together as if they are in a relationship, an intimate one where they share experiences and feelings. Mack was learning to be intimate as Jesus led him into those uncertain waters.

We might say that Jesus has had lots of practice. Jesus lived with twelve disciples whom he called friends. He traveled with the twelve, ate with the twelve, taught the twelve, sent the twelve out to herald the good news and heal the sick, and prayed with the twelve. There were times when he prayed with the twelve (Luke 9:18) and times when he prayed alone (Luke 6:12-13). But there were other times when Jesus prayed with only three.

We might compare the twelve to a kind of task-oriented small group. It was training ground for the twelve and Jesus was their discipler and teacher, but the

three is something different. In a group of three or four, intimacy can happen in ways that does not usually happen in a group of twelve or more.

Intimacy defies definition. It is a subjective, personal experience of being in relation with another. It enables one to actually see into the other: "into-me-see" or intimacy. It is sharing ourselves, our experiences, our feelings, our secrets, our lives. It is letting another person into our real selves—to let them see how we truly see ourselves. We let them come into our shacks.

Obviously, intimacy needs safety; intimacy only happens in safe places with safe people. It only happens when there is trust. And it usually only happens within a small group (three to eight people) or with a few individuals.

Jesus built this kind of intimacy with Peter, James and John. He shared life with them in more intimate ways than he did the twelve. He took them places and did things with them that he did not do with the twelve. Jesus built an intimate trust with these three. In fact, this relationship models how we ourselves might develop intimates.

We build intimacy with others through shared experiences (Luke 8:51). He shared something with them that deepened their friendship and developed intimacy. We partner with each other in a task or spend time with each other in personal, tragic or thrilling moments. Through shared experiences we learn to trust each other as we see each other coping with reality. Shared experiences develop trust.

We build intimacy with others through shared strength (Luke 9:28-29). As Jesus faced his final journey to Jerusalem, he needed affirmation and blessing, and God provided it: "This is my Son whom I love." Jesus brought the three with him as a small prayer group, and God showed up. Together, as an intimate group, the four are strengthened, renewed and affirmed by the divine presence. Jesus finds strength in a divine presence experienced in community with his intimate friends.

We build intimacy with others through shared feelings (Mark 14:33-34). Jesus had just come from an emotional last supper with the twelve and had now come to the Garden of Gethsemane with the eleven. Walking with the three deeper into the garden Jesus begins to feel the enormity of what is about to happen. His spirit is troubled—even frightened—and overwhelmed. Grief and sorrow flood his heart; it crushes him to the point of death. He agonizes over his decision to submit to the will of the Father. Astoundingly, he confesses the depth of his feeling to his

intimate friends; he reveals his true self. He shares his feelings with them. He wants his friends to "watch with him" – to share his feelings, to pray with him, to be there for him. He needs a listening ear; he needs the support of his intimates.

Jesus himself needed the intimacy of human companionship. He would not be authentically human otherwise. God did not create us to live in isolation from others. Rather, he built into us a bonding mechanism that connects with other people. This can become unhealthy (as in codependency), but connection with other people is necessary for personal, mental and spiritual health. Humans are meant to live in relation with others just as the Triune God is community-in-relation. When these relationships remain superficial we lose what God intended intimacy to provide. Without intimacy we become sick and ultimately die inside.

Human intimacy provides authentic relationship, accountability in living, support in times of need, companions to share the joys, and the ability to live without secrets. Jesus nurtured this kind of intimacy with Peter, James and John.

The journey into intimacy is difficult and risky. It is sometimes painful—even as it was for Jesus himself when the three disciples could not stay awake to pray with him and then would later deny him. Yet Jesus risked intimacy and shared himself because any other journey is lonely, fearful and isolating. We cannot become what God intends without intimacy with others. Without intimacy—at some level—we erect a façade, a Hollywood front and we live with a divided self. We retreat into our shells. We let others see one person (a mask), but the real self we keep hidden.

We really don't want anyone to see us as we really are—we really don't want intimacy—because we fear their rejection, disappointment or betrayal. But we cannot truly be ourselves without others—at least someone—knowing us.

Do we have people with whom we can....

- express our deepest and most authentic feelings?
- tell our darkest secrets?
- safely talk about our relationships?
- confess sin?
- let our guards down and be fully real?

Mack learned intimacy by being with the Triune God that weekend. We learn intimacy by being with others. I spend time every week with three different small groups (one with couples and two with just men). I call them my "intimacy

groups" and everyone in those groups knows my secrets. They know me. They know my shack.

As long as our shacks remain hidden, we cannot enjoy what God has designed us to become. As long as our shacks remain hidden, we will live in loneliness, isolation and darkness. God did not design us for that. He invites us to our shacks to share ourselves, experience his love and become all that he intended us to be.

Who knows your shack....all your shack?

Part II

Encountering God in a Fresh Way

What's all the Fuss About?

Chapter Fifteen

An African American Female “Papa”

*There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire
from within a bush.*

Exodus 3:2 (TNIV)

One of the most striking features of Young’s parable is his depiction of the Father. This has occasioned criticism at several levels.

Is it idolatry to portray the Father in such a manner? Does the female metaphor undermine the biblical image of the Father?

Admittedly, the imagery is startling. To picture the Father as a gregarious African American woman is counter-intuitive to most Western Christian sensibilities. Is the Father really so gregarious? Is the Father female? Is the Father African American? Is the intimacy too chummy, too familiar? Is the holiness—the transcendent separateness of the divine—trumped here?

My take on this literary move by Young is shaped by my understanding of what he is doing in *The Shack*. Young is weaving a story that will help wounded people come to believe that God really loves them. Many, like Young himself, were wounded by their fathers. Mack was physically abused by his father and wants nothing to do with him.

A critical moment in the parable is when the door of the shack swings open and Mack meets God. Whose face will he see? What kind of face will he see? How will God greet Mack? If Mack sees his father, then shame, hurt, anger and pain would fill his heart. Instead Mack sees a woman of color.

This arises out of Young’s own experience when his earliest memories of love and acceptance were shaped by the dark skinned women of New Guinea. Those memories and some subsequent relationships with African American women explain why Young portrays “Papa” as an African American woman. Young is not trying to be “politically correct” or promoting some kind of “goddess” motif. Rather, he writes out of his own experience of love — where he himself felt loved.

The African American form of the Father in the parable is a metaphor; it is not a one-to-one image of the Father as if it were an idolatrous substitute for God. It functions as a theophany, not a digital photo. It comes in a vision (dream; Mack had cried himself to sleep on the floor of the shack).

God appears to Mack as an African American woman because this is a metaphor or form that will communicate to Mack how delighted God is to spend time with him. It is a metaphor that overturns some mistaken conceptions of God in Mack's mind—conceptions that are more rooted in his abusive earthly father than in the God of Scripture. It is a theophany—the appearance of God in a particular form—for the sake of encounter, communication and connection.

Theophanies are common in Scripture. God comes as three visitors to Abraham's tent. God, in human form, wrestles with Jacob. God comes as a dove descending out of the heavens at the baptism of Jesus. God appears as a burning bush. God is even pictured with hands and feet sitting on a throne in the Temple's Holy of Holies.

I don't find a theophanic depiction of the Father disturbing. It would be more disturbing (and indebted to Greek philosophy) to ascribe to the Father a kind of transcendence that cannot appear to human beings in a theophany, vision, or dream. This does not detract from the revelation of God in Jesus. In fact, it is consistent with that revelation as incarnation (God coming in the flesh) moves beyond theophanies.

God comes to people in a way that communicates something about the divine identity. This does not mean that the form in which God comes is actually who God is. To identify the form with God is idolatry and fails to recognize that God transcends any form in which God appears. A theophany reveals the divine nature through a particular medium but the divine nature is not limited to that medium.

This is a brilliant move. I know people who cannot connect with the Father's love because their own fathers were so abusive. If they opened their shacks and saw their fathers, they would hesitate, doubt, and reject the "love" offered. Their hearts would leap with fear rather than delight. But if they open their shacks and saw that God has come to them in a form (theophany, metaphor) which connects with loving experiences in their own life, then they would more readily embrace the love offered. God meets us in our personal experiences in ways that best communicate his love for us and in ways we might best experience divine love.

That God appears as a woman is not a huge stretch. Jesus himself told a parable that pictured the Father as a woman searching for a lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) analogous to the father who waited for his lost son to appear in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Scripture often uses feminine metaphors to describe God's love for his people (cf. Isaiah 49:15; 66:13) and even describes God as both the one who fathers us and the one who gives us birth (Deuteronomy 32:18). Young simply uses the metaphor in an extended way to make the same point that Biblical authors do. It is a theophany of divine love.

God, of course, is neither African American nor Asian nor Western. God, of course, is neither male nor female; neither black nor white. God transcends and at the same time encompasses such categories. Masculinity and femininity are both aspects of the divine nature since we—male and female—were created in the image of God. Whether black or white or red or yellow—as we sing the children's song, the diverse ethnicity and colors are also aspects of God's own diversity (the Trinity) and his love for the diverse character of the creation. God created diversity! It is part of God's original intent for the world.

Young recognizes the relative way in which God appears as an African American woman by changing the form when Papa leads Mack to Missy's body. On that day Mack needed a father, that is, he needed the human qualities that fathers represent, and Papa comes to him as male. The form in which God appears to Mack is relative to Mack's needs as God seeks to commune and communicate with his beloved.

The truth is that God is delighted to meet us at our shacks. Young communicates this through a feminine African American metaphor for the Father because it is what Mack needs (and how Young experienced recovery as he connected with those early experiences of love from the indigenous women of New Guinea).

I find it helpful to use different metaphors for God as I envision his delight for me and experience the comfort of his enveloping love—something I am still learning to do. Whether it is crawling into my mother's lap or a bear hug from my brother, it communicates something true about the Father where an image of a male parent might not always do the same thing emotionally and spiritually. My favorite metaphor for the God who greets me at my shack is the image of Joshua sleeping in my arms as he rests on my lap in my big chair.

The Shack's metaphor is bold and daring but enriching and redemptive for those who connect with it given their own particular experiences.

Our imagination, guided by Scripture and sanctified by the Spirit, is an important tool for letting the truth that God loves us sink into our hearts, into our guts. During my devotional time, I envision the Father, Son and Spirit meeting with me. They are delighted that I have come to listen to them and talk with them. They welcome me. My imagination becomes a means by which I experience, by the power of the Spirit, the love of the Triune God.

The Shack has given many believers the resources to imagine—to visualize in their minds—their own encounter with God for the sake of imbibing his love and letting it settle into their hearts. The Spirit uses our imagination—he uses our dreams, art and poetry for that purpose just as he uses preaching, assembled praise and the sacraments (e.g., baptism and the Lord's Supper) as well. The Spirit, through metaphors, images, other people, and the sacraments, impresses our hearts with the truth that the Father loves us and that we are God's beloved in whom God delights.

Chapter Sixteen

Intimacy with “Papa”: Renaming God?

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

Romans 8:15-16 (TNIV)

One of the more striking dimensions of *The Shack* is the intimate picture Young paints of Mack’s relationship with the Triune God. This intimacy is portrayed through actions (eating, gardening, and cooking with God), language (“Papa”), and settings (lake, log cabin, garden). Relationality is at the heart of this picture as God lives in relationship with Mack, the kind of relationship that is fully and personally engaged in every aspect of Mack’s being.

It seems obvious to me that “Papa” is a modernized English version of “Abba,” an Aramaic term for father. But “Papa” may communicate something that is not in the Aramaic term “Abba.” It has been a common misunderstanding that “Abba” is a diminutive form of “Father” such as “Daddy” or “Papa.” “Abba,” however, is a respectful direct address that also expresses intimacy—perhaps something like “my dear father.” It expresses intimacy with respect and honor.

As a consequence, I’m not too enthused about “Papa” as a form of address to God in my own prayer life or talking about God since it can lack a sense of honor or reverence (depending on how it is heard or used). But I understand the point Young wants to make. He wants to lead us into a kind of familial kinship with God. And, indeed, we should embrace that kind of relationship with the Triune God. “Papa” works as a metaphor for intimacy, but unintended consequences or implications may render its usefulness in liturgy or theology suspect. It can reduce God to a “papa” (a human conceptualization—but so can any human word) if we remove it from the context of the novel itself or the context of a broader theology (who God is).

Context is important here. Young seeks to reconnect wounded people with the God whom they believe, in some sense, wounded them. Consequently, an emphasis on intimacy, relationality, and familiarity is important for healing. Wounded people need to experience the delight that God has in them, the ease

with which God converses with them, and the friendliness of God. With this context and purpose "Papa" works as a metaphor.

At this point it would be easy to critique the way Young portrays how chummy God is with Mack. One could easily forget about God's transcendent otherness, his holy separateness when watching Papa, Jesus and Sarayu converse with Mack. But this would be unfair to Young's purpose.

There are moments when Papa reminds Mack that his appearance to him does not mean that now Mack can fully grasp God's identity. For example, Papa tells Mack, "I am far more than that, above and beyond all that you can ask or think" (p. 98) and it is a "good thing" that Mack cannot "grasp the wonder" of God's nature (p. 101). This is a healthy emphasis on divine transcendence.

But despite such caveats and the parabolic context, nagging discomfort remains for some. I understand that discomfort. I feel it a bit myself. I feel it because I sense that there is not sufficient acknowledgement of the holiness of God in the book. What I mean by "holiness" is not God's ethical perfection, but God's otherness and separateness (cf. Psalm 99:1-3). It is the kind of "holiness" that demands that Moses take off his shoes before the theophany of the burning bush (Exodus 3). It is the kind of "holiness" that evokes a confession of sin from Isaiah before the throne of God (Isaiah 6). This is generally missing in the novel. And, yet, at the same time, I understand why it is missing: wounded people initially need divine intimacy rather than divine transcendence for their healing.

A corollary of this missing sense of divine holiness is the absence of the wrath of God in the work. But is it totally absent? It is absent in that the fire of God does not consume sinful people in the book (and that is not an image wounded people need to hear initially), but it is not absent in the sense that God holds Mack accountable at every point. Mack is not let off the hook. He is confronted, particularly in the chapter where Sophia questions him. Mack is forced to face judgment in the sense that he has to face himself and acknowledge the truth about himself.

At the same time we should remember that the language of divine friendship is present in Scripture. Job, for example, spoke of "God's intimate friendship" in the days prior to his suffering (Job 29:4). Abraham is described as God's "friend" in several places (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23). Jesus calls his disciples "friends" (John 15:14). Moreover, since the marriage metaphor is so

often used to describe God's relationship with his people, "intimates" as well as "friends" is an appropriate description of how God enjoys his people.

Young's focus on intimacy and relationship is healthy for wounded people. It is not the whole story and there is no claim that the parable tells the whole story. This parable is no more the whole story than the Prodigal Son is the whole story. But it has a significant and important point to make about intimacy.

Intimacy is what religion addicts and performance-oriented believers lack. We do the rituals, follow the rules, and pursue good works for approval or out of duty. This ultimately wounds us by shaping us into people who emphasize rules rather than relationships. And when the other wounds of life come, it provides little comfort. Rather, we take our licks, continue our performance, and hide a nagging sense of God's unfairness in our hearts. Since we have little or no relationship or intimacy with God—even though we think we do!—we pull ourselves up by our boot straps and keep on keeping on. We persevere in our duty.

That kind of perseverance, however, turns into bitterness and meanness. We are upset that others are not performing like we perform. We are bitter that we are wounded despite our good performances. We become unforgiving, unmerciful, and unhappy—we will treat others the way we think God has treated us, or at least as other religion addicts have treated us. Nevertheless we keep doing our duty because we are religion addicts.

Intimacy is the path of healing for addicts. Intimacy with God—eating with God at the table—heals wounds. It is not the only aspect of God, nor should we reduce God to some human conception of intimacy, but it is a necessary part of healing from our woundedness. Intimacy brings joy in the midst of hurt. Intimacy displays God's delight in us. Intimacy brings forgiveness, mercy, and joy.

In that context the metaphor "Papa" works for me. God has invited me into the circle of his love to enjoy the familial reality that is the communion of the Triune God. God rejoices and sings over me...*even in my shack!* Wow!

Thanks, Papa.

Chapter Seventeen

Three and One: Trinitarian Heresy?

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

2 Corinthians 13:14 (TNIV)

The portrayal of the Trinity in *The Shack* has come under two assaults from critics. Some suggest *The Shack* teaches modalism while others believe it teaches tritheism (both of these ideas are defined below). The fact that such polar opposite accusations are present in the blog-o-sphere indicates...well, it is interesting to say the least. Perhaps it is more in the eye (or agenda) of the critic than in the text of the novel.

Modalism is an ancient heresy that affirms that the one God comes to us as Father, Son and Spirit—these names are merely different modes of revelation or different hats that the one God wears. There is no personal distinction between the Father, Son and Spirit. Rather, God is one person who appears in different ways at different times. Ultimately, the Father is the same person as the Son and the Spirit is the same person as the Father and the Son is the same person as the Spirit. There are no real, personal distinctions or individuations of any kind within the one God. There is no real threeness—“three” is only an appearance.

Tritheism is another ancient heresy which few, if any, ever affirmed but the early church sought to avoid. It affirms that God is a triad of three independent beings as if three gods came together to work on an agreed plan of action. They formed a kind of corporation to accomplish a task together. There is no union in substance or essence but only in terms of purpose and goal. They are three autonomous gods who decided to work together.

Trinitarianism (Christian Orthodoxy) has always sought to avoid both extremes, though not always successfully. I think *The Shack* wants to avoid those extremes as well. It is hard to see modalism when all three sit at the table eating with Mack and he has distinct personal conversations with each. Tritheism seems more likely because threeness is emphasized in *The Shack*. But Young is also careful to stress the unity, mutual interdependence, and shared consciousness of

Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu—their total transparency, deference and shared life are intended to communicate oneness.

Young is neither a modalist nor a tritheist in intent. Papa's statement to Mack clearly rejects both (p. 101):

We are not three gods [tritheism, JMH], and we are not talking about one god with three attitudes [modalism, JMH], like a man who is a husband, father, and worker [wearing different hats, JMH]. I am one God and I am three persons, and each of the three is fully and entirely the one.

Young's formulation is a classic statement of Trinitarianism: one God in three persons.

So, what are we to make of this? What is important here theologically? What generates confusion about this? Why is this important for the message of *The Shack*?

The accusation of modalism is rooted in Papa's wounds. The Father, in Young's parable, has stigmata, the wounds of the cross, on her body. She bears the marks of the cross. "Mack noticed the scars in her wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his" (p. 95). This is, supposedly, evidence of Patripassianism (a form of modalism), that is, that the Father suffered on the cross as if the Father and Son were the same person rather than distinct persons.

I think this accusation misses the point and thus misses one of the key healing motifs that the parable embraces. The scars are not about modalism, but about the experience of the Father through the incarnation of the Son. The Father suffers through the Son rather than suffering as the Son (which would be modalistic Patripassianism, that is, the "suffering of the Father"). The Father dwells in the Son as he suffers and thus the Father suffers as well. In that sense, as Papa says, "we were there *together*" (p. 96). The Father was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

This is an important point. The Father empathizes with humanity through the Son. Mack wonders how Papa could ever understand how he feels....and then he sees the wounds on Papa as tears trickled down her face (p. 95). When Jesus suffered, the Triune God—including the Father—suffered through him because he participates in the divine community and the divine community is transparent

with each other. Jesus' human experience becomes the experience of the Father through the shared consciousness of the Triune God. This does not mean that the Father became flesh or experienced flesh independently of the Son, nor does it mean that the Father died on the cross, but the Father did enter into human experience through the suffering of the Son by means of the shared consciousness (the oneness) of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

A populist understanding of atonement tends to distance the Father from the suffering of the Son. The Father is the punisher and the Son persuades the Father to accept sinners. The wounds on Papa are a corrective to this populist misunderstanding. When Mack is angry about how broken the world is, he asks "why doesn't he do something about it?" "He already has," Sophia answered, "Haven't you seen the wounds on Papa, too?" (p. 164). The Father suffered—the whole Trinity suffered—through the death of Jesus, and they suffered for the sake of mercy and out of their love. This is not modalism; this is good pastoral theology.

Tritheism, it seems to me, is the more problematic accusation. The problem in describing a theophanic encounter with the Father, Son and Spirit is the seeming individualization of the Father, Son and Spirit. Human language is limited in its attempt to approximate the transcendent reality of the Triune relationship. Anytime we describe this relationship with human metaphors (e.g., African American Papa, Asian Sarayu, dove?, etc.) we risk reducing the Trinity to those metaphors. Anytime we talk about the Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct individuations or persons, we risk tritheism.

But Scripture itself does this. There is a threeness that can certainly appear tritheistic at the baptism of Jesus—the Father's voice, Jesus in the water, and the dove (Holy Spirit) descending. John 14-17 can be read in a trithesitic way—there are clearly three identities with their own personal pronouns distinct from the other as Father, Son and Spirit. At the same time in John 14-17, there is unity of nature, purpose, and communion through mutual indwelling.

The fundamental problem, I think, is that the unity of the three persons of the Trinity far transcends any human ability to imagine. Modern Westerners live so individualistically and look at the world with such compartmentalization that the substantial and communal unity of three persons is inconceivable. In reality, it is indescribable as the finite human mind attempts to grasp the transcendent unity of God in three persons.

Theophanies will naturally tend toward individuation but they are theophanies, not the reality of God within himself. So, I think we should give Young a break here just as we see Scripture doing something similar in the three friends who visit Abraham. Human language cannot fully describe or portray the one God in three persons. Theophanies are impressionistic paintings – to make an impression on us; they are not digital photographs.

The Shack seeks to maintain the Trinitarian balance of “oneness” and “threeness.” Whether it does or not is subject to debate just as any account—even by well-known theologians—is as well. But it seems clear that Young intends to steer a course between modalism and tritheism.

So why is this important for healing? Why talk about Trinity in *The Shack* and how does this help wounded people? Turn the page and read on.....

Chapter Eighteen

Trinity: A Circle of Love

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me...I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

John 17:22-23, 26 (TNIV)

Mack, to say the least, is startled by the way God appeared to him in the shack..."two women and a man and none of them white?" Confused, Mack asked, "which one of you is God?" "I am," they all answered "in unison" (p. 87). All three are "I am"—they are all God.

It is a striking picture. If we focus entirely on the gender and ethnicity of the theophanic representations (though they have a point), we will miss what is at the real heart of Young's parable.

The Triune God is a "circle of relationship" (p. 122). The content or experience of this relationship is itself love. Love "already exists within" God—it is the experience of the Father, Son and Spirit in relationship. They—their relationship, their being-in-relation—is love (p. 101). The Trinity is a community; God is a community. And God is love.

Perhaps if we want to identify the kind of Trinitarianism present in *The Shack*, it comes closest to the Social Trinitarianism of the Eastern fathers, particularly the Cappadocians, and is embraced by many prominent theologians. What is important about this way of conceiving the Trinity is, in part, the social relation between the persons of the Trinity. They exist in a communion of relationship in which they experience what the Greek church has called *perichoresis*.

Don't be frightened by this Greek word, but embrace it. It offers a powerful picture of God. You might recognize *peri* as part of many English terms like perimeter or periscope. It means "around" or in the round, a circle. *Choresis* is

present in English words like choreography and means “dance.” Imagine a Greek wedding (like in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*) where the guests dance in a circle holding hands. This is the Trinitarian dance—a circle of love which is filled with joy, transparency and intimacy.

The perichoretic Trinity lives in a harmonious community as being-in-relation; they live in transparency and in sync with each other as one. They interpenetrate each other—they mutually indwell and co-inhere each other. The one God lives in a relational community, in a circle of love, in a beautiful and wondrous dance of love. Their oneness far exceeds any vision of oneness humans can muster but their relationship is exactly what we were created to image in our communal life. We are to become one just as they are one.

This is what, I think, Young pictures in *The Shack*. Clearly, it is an accomodative, metaphorial picture. It is art, not science.



This kind of Trinitarian picture is a historic part of Eastern Orthodox iconography. One of the most famous is Rublev’s “Holy Trinity” (1410). The icon portrays Abraham’s three visitors as the Trinity (Genesis 18:1 says that “the Lord appeared to Abraham”). The icon paints this theophany. Here, as in Young’s story, we have three sitting at a table communing with each other but also inviting us to commune with them. Notice how the chalice on the table invites viewers to sit at the table with the three and drink with them. We are invited to participate in the divine communion—to join the circle of love, to join the dance.

Young’s parable is a literary form of what is pictured in that icon. It is far from heretical. Rather, it is a parabolic portrayal of the reality of Social Trinitarianism which is what the Eastern church has affirmed for centuries.

But why is this important to Young? What does this have to with our shacks?

Wounded people tend to isolate. Addicts immerse themselves in their own shame and feel unloved. Trinitarian theology is extremely important for the

wounded and the addict because Social Trinitarianism emphasizes the relationality and communion of love between the three persons. "Love and relationship," Papa says, "already exists within Me"—within the Triune God (p. 101). God has never been alone but has always been a community of love, that is, always in relationship with another and that relationship is love.

What *The Shack* offers wounded people is a vision of the loving relationship into which they are invited. This is who God is—the lover who yearns to bear hug us and wants us to experience loving communion. Wounded people want to be loved; they need to be loved. They want to feel loved. And this is who God, as Trinity, is—"I am love," says Papa (p. 101). This is not an abstract idea but a dynamic, real communing between the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world, and the Father loves us just as he loves his own Son (John 17:23-24). The mission of God is to include us in the circle of *perichoretic* love. The love that the Father, Son, and Spirit have for each other is exactly the love God wants us to experience in our relationship with him. The mission of God is that "the love with which" the Father "loved" the Son "may be in" us and they in us (John 17:26). As Jesus tells Mack, humans were "always intended to be [in] the very center of our love and our purpose" and "my purpose from the beginning was to live in you and you in me" (pp. 111-112).

That is truly amazing! It is the good news of the gospel. Though the world is broken and filled with pain, though I am wounded and sinful, the good news is that God places me at the center of his love and purpose. The good news is, no matter what my shack my look like, I am loved!

I see myself at the center of God's love. The Father, Son and Spirit joined hand-in-hand form a circle of love and they dance around me. I stand in the middle of their circle as the Triune God dances around me, rejoices over me and pours their love into my heart. The Father, Son and Spirit sing over me as I bask in the sunlight of their love.

Chapter Nineteen

An Asian Holy Spirit?

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit

Romans 15:13

Saryu is a Hindi word, a language spoken in India. Some have thought that Young is subtly introducing Hinduism into Christianity or introducing some kind of religious pluralism. But the truth is much more innocuous than that.

As Young has told the story on many occasions (check his talks on the internet), he was baffled by what name to give the Holy Spirit in his parable. He knew he wanted a name that meant “wind” which is exactly what both the Hebrew (*ruach*) and Greek (*pneuma*) words translated “Spirit” mean. While engaged in a job-related conversation with a tech in India, he asked her what they called “wind” in India. She gave him several different names but when she used the term “sarayu” his ears perked up. It sounded good, but to what kind of wind did it refer? The tech described it as a wind that was unexpected but refreshing, the kind of wind that catches you by surprise—a fresh breeze that everyone loves and makes a hot day bearable. In addition, the word also names a river in India.

Young uses this name because this is exactly what the Spirit is in the life of the believer—a surprising, unpredictable, refreshing breath of God which forms a river of living river of water within us. These are the metaphors which John uses in his Gospel (John 3:6-8; 7:37-39). Sarayu, the “playful eddying wind,” is Young’s attempt to visualize the Holy Spirit in the light of the Gospel of John’s own metaphors (p. 130).

Since Sarayu is an Hindi name for wind (p. 110), Young describes him/her—the theophany does not clearly identify the gender of Sarayu, sometimes female, sometimes male (p. 121)—as an Asian breath, an almost ethereal figure that moves gently across a room with blowing hair and shimmering light (p. 84). Light radiates through her which gives the appearance of being in several places at once (p. 128) as she floats from one place to another (p. 130). Sarayu is a sunbeam of love.

How does one describe the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit? If the Father seems sometimes the most distant (transcendent) of the Triune fellowship, the Spirit seems the most mysterious. Jesus has a face; he is a human being with whom we can identify. The Spirit does not have a face. Fatherhood is a metaphor with which we can connect in terms of our earthly experience. But "Spirit" seems indefinable, indescribable and imperceptible. Attempting to depict the Spirit in pictorial forms (as the Gospels do with the "dove" at the baptism of Jesus) is a difficult task. Any choice would be subject to criticism, but we also need to listen to what the author is attempting to communicate. If a descending dove was a symbol of the glory of God descending on the obedient Son, what is the symbolism of Sarayu in Young's parable?

Young introduces Sarayu as the collector of tears. "We all have things," she asks, "we value enough to collect, don't we?" (p.84). Mack collected his valuables in a tin box which contained, among other things, Missy's picture. Sarayu removes tears from our faces and collects them in her "crystal bottle." She is the presence of God who wipes our tears, holds them in her heart and comforts us. The Holy Spirit is the great comforter who lives within us; the one who groans with us, groans for us and soothes us with the calm of a mother's touch.

The primary work of the Spirit in *The Shack*, however, is gardener. Sarayu is the "keeper of gardens" (p.87)—not just Mack's garden, but all of our gardens. We each have a garden; it is our soul.

The garden is a rich metaphor for the Spirit's presence in our lives. The Spirit tends our gardens—weeding, pruning, watering, burning and creating. Sarayu loves her gardens, takes joy in the work she does and anticipates (yearns for) the finished product which is never quite finished in the present. We are always "wild and beautiful and perfectly in process" (p. 138).

The Spirit, who is the love of God poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5), is the active gardener producing the fruit of peace, joy and love in our lives. The Spirit of patience produces patience in our hearts so that we learn to live through (endure) the Great Sadness in our lives. The Spirit of gentleness produces gentleness in us so that we treat others with kindness and forgiveness. The Spirit of goodness produces the kind of goodness that embodies the life of God in our lives. These are the "fruits of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22).

The Spirit produces them but we cooperate with the Spirit as we "keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). We tend our own gardens as well. The Spirit

invites us to help her—just as in the original garden (Eden) God invited humanity to tend the garden as their own representative (image). But humanity knows how to mess up a garden much better than it knows how to cooperate with God’s Spirit. We create our own messes, and other humans trespass in and destroy our gardens.

But God even loves our messes and continues to tend our gardens....rooting out the woundedness and planting fresh flowers to bloom in our hearts. The Spirit is always doing something new in the garden. Sarayu is not yet finished with us; she is a surprising, fresh wind cooling our hot days.

The presence of Sarayu in our gardens, our souls, is an expression of the intimacy that God shares with us. By the Spirit we cry “Abba, Father” (Galatians 4:6). We pray through the “love of the Spirit” (Romans 15:30) which fills our hearts and live in the “communion of the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:14). The Spirit is the presence of God in our hearts—real, authentic and experiential. The Spirit is always present—always with us (p. 195).

The constant presence of God is partly the means by which our relationship with God grows and blooms. As that relationship deepens and the Spirit beautifies (sanctifies) our garden more completely, we become intimates with God. We come to know God—not simply in cognitive or propositional ways, but we come to know God’s own heart and experience his life within us.

This is the intimacy that Sarayu illuminates when she explains that she wants Mack “to be aware” of her “in a special way.” She wants him to “hear” her. Sarayu describes it as learning to hear the Spirit’s thoughts in our own thoughts (p. 195). This does not mean human beings become infallible or no longer mistake their own agendas for God’s goals—we have done that way too often. But it does mean that slowly, progressively and ultimately God shapes our hearts into the image of his own. When our hearts are God-shaped—as the Spirit writes the life of God upon our hearts—we can hear the Spirit’s thoughts in our own thoughts. The Spirit helps us become like God.

Sarayu, this surprising Asian theophany, reminds us that the Spirit of God cannot be captured and controlled any more than the wind can. The Spirit blows where he/she/it wills and surprises us with peace, comfort and grace in life’s most troubled moments. The Spirit surprises us with holiness which we once thought impossible in our broken shacks.

The God of hope brings hope, renewal and peace into our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter Twenty

What If God Were One of Us: Jesus, a Dependent Human?

*Who, being in very nature God,
 did not consider equality with God
 something to be used to his own advantage;
 rather, he made himself nothing
 by taking the very nature of a servant,
 being made in human likeness.
 And being found in appearance as a human being,
 he humbled himself
 by becoming obedient to death—
 even death on a cross!*

Philippians 2:6-8 (TNIV)

“A *kenotic* Christ!” critics of *The Shack* have exclaimed with horror. So, what’s the problem? What are they talking about?

The term *kenosis* comes from the classic text in Philippians 2:7. The Greek verb *kenoo* is translated “made himself nothing” by the TNIV and “emptied himself” by the NRSV. The term’s literal meaning is “empty or pour out” but the metaphorical meaning is “humbled.” *Kenosis* or *kenotic* is Paul’s language for the intentional self-humiliation of the Son. The one who existed in the form of God became, through incarnation, one who existed in the form of a human being (servant).

What does it mean for the Son to humble himself or empty himself by becoming a human bound over to death? There are many theories as to actually how this happens and what happens. Since the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. orthodox Christology has maintained that the Son became human while remaining divine but that the two natures are distinct and unmixed though united in one person. *The Shack*, I believe, operates within this creedal frame. But clearly this is something difficult for the finite mind to grasp and difficult to portray in a piece of art.

Where I think *The Shack* serves us well is in some of its orthodox but “kenotic” Christology. While it seems clear to me that Young does not suggest a full blown kenotic theory that denies the deity of Jesus in the flesh (all three do answer “I

am” to the question “Which one is God?”), I am not particularly interested in attempting to specify a historical categorization of Young’s Christology. Rather, my interest is pastoral rather than historic. My interest is a point that has significant pastoral implications.

Here are some lines from *The Shack* that are particularly important for my purpose.

Jesus “*has never drawn upon his nature as God to do anything*” (p. 99).

Jesus lived as a “*dependent, limited human being*” (p. 100); he lived a “*dependent life*” (p. 137).

“*So even though I created this, I see it now as a human*” (p. 109).

“*I choose to live moment by moment fully human*” (p. 112).

As I live in my shack, these motifs illuminate something very important to me. Jesus teaches me how to live and be comfortable in my own skin. He became flesh, lived in his own skin, maintained his identity as God’s beloved, and loved other people out of that identity. This is how I want to live as well. Jesus apprentices us in how to live a fully authentic human life.

Jesus did not draw on his divinity to get himself out of messes. He did not even perform miracles by an independent exercise of divine power. Rather, it was by the Spirit that he cast out demons. Anointed with the Spirit at his baptism, the Spirit empowered for the ministry of liberation—freeing the captives, healing the sick, preaching good news to the poor.

He lived in his own skin—human skin. Human skin, then, is not evil or bad. The incarnation, like creation itself, sanctifies materiality. It sanctifies flesh and bone. The flesh—our bodies—are good.

Living in his own skin, Jesus saw the world through human eyes. This is something that Jesus chooses to do—it is a conscious, self-limiting act. He grew in wisdom; he learned obedience. He lived with the limitations of human skin. He lived a “dependent life,” that is, a life wholly dependent upon his Father and the empowering Spirit to fulfill his mission in the world. He was not an autonomous God in the flesh or an independent agent, but the divine Word (Logos) surrendered his power by self-limitation for the purposes of experiencing the cosmos as a “limited” human being, just like the rest of us.

In this way he was tempted just like we are yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He lived an authentic human life which included trials, tribulations and temptations. He was not only true human, but truly human.

This is the root of the Son's empathy with humanity. He truly knows what is like to be hungry and thirsty; to be fatigued and suffer pain; to be tempted and to pray as a dependent human being; and to suffer shame and death on a cross. The Son is empathetic because he became like us in every way; he lived in his own skin—a reality he shared with us. Jesus even drops the pancake batter in the cabin kitchen just as Mack did on the morning Missy disappeared—a subtle, but poignant stroke by Young.

This is one of my comforts, one of my anchors in the storms of life. The empathy of God through Jesus means that God understands my suffering and humanity; God has experienced humanity. He knows what it is like—he does not simply know about it, but he has experienced the human condition as an insider. In addition, Papa also has the stigmata—wounds he received through Jesus (p. 164). The Triune God understands the human condition and predicament.

Though these points are extremely important, the more basic point—and one stressed in *The Shack*—is the *intimacy* God shares with humanity through the union of divine and human in Jesus. We were designed for this union; we were created for communion with God.

The incarnation is the ultimate expression of the divine intent to commune with humanity. The incarnation is an act of *intimacy*. God unites with us—not simply in some moral or ideological vision, but in reality, in the flesh, in our finitude. When God became flesh, he became intimately empathetic. God truly shared himself with us and took our pain up into his own life....but not just our pain, our humanity itself. God became intimate in the most literal and fundamental way possible—he really and personally united the divine and the human.

We are thereby one with God on many levels and in many ways. Just as the Father, Son and Spirit mutually indwell each other, humanity is included in that communion so that we dwell within the divine communion ourselves. We have not become gods, of course, but we do share in the communion of the Triune God. We mutually indwell the divine as the divine dwells in us—we are in them and they are in us. It is an intimacy beyond our imagination and yet to be fully experienced though we taste it even now.

The picture *The Shack* offers us portrays Jesus as still human but still intimate with the Father and the Spirit—and yet also intimate with us, even now...still! When he ascended, he did not divest himself of his humanity. Quite the contrary, he remains the one in whom the divine and human are united, the mediator who as both divine and human reconciles God and humanity. Jesus remains human...and will forever remain so.

When I suggest that the Son of God is eternally human—forever our brother, forever our high priest—I sometimes get some surprised looks from people. Many seem to think that upon his return to “heaven,” the Son of God shed his humanity and returned to his previous existence as simply God. Some think that the Son is no longer Jesus, that is, he is no longer human or that at least he will not be human forever.

But the union of the divine and human in the one person—Jesus, the Son of God—is an eternal reality. The Logos gave up his simple and exclusive existence as God to also become human (to add humanity to himself) and human he will remain. His humanity is now as much a part of his identity as his divinity. He did not cease to be God to become human but neither did he put on humanity as a temporary cloak. He became human, still is human, and will eternally remain so.

This inspires awe. It is the wonder of the Son’s incarnational humiliation. His incarnation was not simply for thirty-three years but was eternal in nature. His humility has an eternal quality. He became human to remain human for the sake of restoring humanity and living eternally as a brother with other humans. How awesome is that?!

Perhaps this is what Papa is talking about when she said to Mack, “One day you folk will understand what he gave up. There are just no words” (p. 191). This is the love of God—Father, Son and Spirit. This is the sacrifice of God for our sakes. This is the mystery of redemption.

Then again perhaps we will never understand, but we will have an eternity to explore the wonder of what the Son gave up for us and how the Triune God took humanity up into their own life and communion. What a wonder it will be!

Wounded people need to hear that someone truly loves them that much. They feel unloved and unlovable, but the incarnation testifies to the love of God. God

loved us so much that he became human for our sakes. He emptied himself in order to fill us up. He became poor that we might become rich.

Was it worth the price? "Absolutely!" Jesus responded to Papa's question. "And I would have done it even if it were *only* for you" (p. 103)! I am worth that much to God. I am, you are, worthy of love. We are worth it!

Are we really that important to God? Indeed we are!

Chapter Twenty-One

God and Evil: Can God be Justified?

*Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”*

Romans 11:33-34 (NIV)

The death of a child, especially the brutal murder of Missy, raises passionate questions about God’s handling of the world. Mack’s “last comment” to the Triune God around the breakfast table on that first morning was something we have all thought at one time or another: “I just can’t imagine any final outcome that would justify all this” (p. 127).

There it is. Bold. In God’s face. It is almost a gauntlet challenging God’s own imagination, his own resources—his wisdom and knowledge. Can anything justify the evil in the world?

This is the problem of theodicy, that is, the justification of God. Why does God create a world in which evil is so pervasive, strong and unruly? Why does he give evil this space to grow? When a cyclone kills over 130,000 in Myanmar and an earthquake snuffs out the lives of 80,000 more in China, I have little interest in defending or justifying God.

When my son dies of a genetic disorder after watching him slowly degenerate over ten years and I learn of the tragic death of a friend’s son (John Robert Dobbs)—both dying on the same date, May 21—I have little interest in defending or justifying God.

How could I possibly defend any of that? I suppose I could remove God from responsibility by disconnecting him from his creation but I would then still have a God who decided to be a Deist. That’s no comfort—it renders God malevolent or at least disinterested. I prefer to say God is involved and he decides to permit (even cause—though I would have no way of knowing which is the case in any particular circumstance) suffering. I would prefer to hold God responsible for the world he created and how the world proceeds.

I'm tired of defending him. Does God really need my feeble, finite, and fallible arguments in his defense? Perhaps some need to hear a defense—maybe it would help, but I also know it is woefully inadequate at many levels. God does not need my defense as much as God needs to encounter people in their crises. My arguments will not make the difference; only God's presence will.

I know the theodices and I have attempted them myself. Young utilizes a few of them. A free-will theodicy that roots evil in the free choices of human beings does not help me with earthquakes, genetics and cyclones. It certainly does not explain why God does not answer the prayers of his people with compassionate protection from such. A soul-making theodicy that says God permits evil to develop our characters does not explain the quantity and quality of suffering in the world. Suffering sometimes breaks souls rather than making them. There are other theodicies and combinations, but I find them all pastorally inadequate and rationally unsatisfying.

My rationalizations have all shipwrecked on the rocks of experience in a hurting and painful world. The way I most often approach God in the midst of suffering is now *protest*, a form of lament.

Does God have a good reason for the pervasive and seemingly gratuitous nature of suffering in the world? I hope he does—I even believe he does, but I don't know what the reasons are nor do I know anyone who does. My hope is not the conclusion of a well-reasoned, solid inductive/deductive argument but is rather the desperate cry of the sufferer who trusts that the Creator has good intentions and purposes for his creation. I believe there is a Grand Purpose that overcomes the Great Sadness.

Lament is not exactly a theodicy, but it is my response to suffering. It contains my complaint that God is not doing more (Psalm 74:11), my questions about "how long?" (Psalm 13:1), my demand to have my "Why?" questions answered (Psalm 44:24), and my disillusionment with God's handling of the world (Job 21, 23-24). It is what I feel; it is my only "rational" response to suffering.

I realize that I am a lowly creature whose limitations should relativize my protest (as when God came to Job). But, as with Job and the Psalmists, I continue to lament—I continue because I have divine permission to do so! Of all "people," I must be honest with God, right? I recognize that my feeble laments cannot grasp the transcendent glory of the one who created the world and I realize that were

God to speak he would say to me something of what he told Job. But until he speaks....until he comforts...until he transforms the world, I will continue to speak, lament and protest.

But that response is itself insufficient. I protest, but I must also act.

As one who believes the story of Jesus, I trust that God intends to redeem, heal and renew his world. As a disciple of Jesus, I am committed to imitate his compassion for the hurting, participate in the healing, and sacrifice for redemption. I am, however, at this point an impatient disciple.

Does this mean that there are no comforting "words" for the sufferer? No, I think the story itself is a comfort; we have a story to tell but we must tell it without rationalizing or minimizing creation's pain. We have a story to tell about God, Israel and Jesus. God loves us despite the seeming evidence to the contrary. God listens to our protests despite our anger and disillusionment. God empathizes with our suffering through the incarnation despite our sense that no one has suffered like we have. God reigns over his world despite the seeming chaos. God will defeat suffering and renew his creation despite its current tragic condition. The story carries hope in its bosom and it is with hope that we grieve.

Mack could not "imagine any final outcome that would justify" all the evil in the world. This is something that Mack says before he sits on the judgment seat before Sophia, but it is a function of the judgment seat to decide what would justify evil and would not. If humans can't imagine it, then it can't be possible, right? And that is the crux of the problem—human imagination has become the norm rather than trusting God's wisdom and knowledge that is beyond searching out, plotting or understanding.

Human imagination or trust in divine wisdom? Which shall we choose? The former, as a criterion, excludes the latter. The latter is patient with the former's limitations.

But trust is the fundamental problem. At the root of distrust is the suspicion, as Papa tells Mack, "that you don't think that I am good" (p. 126). We humans tend to trust our own imagination (or rationality) more than we trust God's goodness. We doubt that "everything—the means, the ends, and all the processes of individual lives—is all covered by [God's] goodness" (p. 126).

In one of the most powerful scenes in *The Shack* Papa acknowledges that he could “have prevented what happened to Missy.” He “could have chosen to actively interfere in her circumstance,” but he decided not to do it (p. 222). Only love enabled Mack to trust God with that decision.

We can't imagine what could possibly justify evil? But, at one level, that is the wrong question. *God's purpose is not to justify it, but to redeem it* (p. 127).

My favorite scene in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of Christ* is when Jesus, carrying the cross, falls to his knees under its weight. His mother runs to him and their eyes lock. With blood streaming down his cheeks and holding the symbol of Roman power and violence, Jesus says, "Behold, mother, I make all things new."

This is the promise of God—a new creation, new heavens and a new earth in a new Jerusalem. There the old order will pass away and the voice of God will declare: "I am making everything new" (Revelation 21:5a).

A day is coming when there will be "no more curse" (Revelation 22:3). There will be no more darkness--the glory of God will fill the earth with light. There will be no more violence--the nations will receive healing and walk by its light. There will be no more death, mourning or tears--the Tree of Life and the Water of Life will nourish the people of God forever.

That renewal, however, is not simply future but is already present. Hope saves us even now. As the Father pours out his love into our hearts by his Spirit, includes us in the Triune fellowship at his breakfast table, and walks with us in our suffering, we can experience the joy of relationship, the peace of love and the hope of renewal.

Mack discovered it when he learned to trust. We will too.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Weaving a Tapestry of Love: Divine Providence

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28 (TNIV)

The Shack recognizes the pervasive, rooted and intensive presence of evil in the world. The source of this evil, according to the parable, is ultimately human freedom as humanity chose autonomy rather than dependence upon God. We chose to create our own story rather than participate in God's Grand Purpose. And when we chose this path, we dragged "the entire Creation along" with us (p. 132).

The Triune God respects this freedom since it is God's own design, and God has "never taken control" of human choices and "forced" humanity "to do anything" (p. 145).

But this does not render God powerless. Through much of the dialogue between Mack and God there is a wondrous sense that God is neither hamstrung nor thwarted by the freedom Papa gives humanity. God sometimes works around it, sometimes through it, and sometimes against it, but at all times God pursues his purposes and those purposes will not be frustrated. God uses human "choices to work perfectly into [his] purposes" (p. 189).

But, Mack quietly voiced at the breakfast table, "what is the value in a little girl being murdered by some twisted deviant?" "You may not cause those things," Mack continued, "but you certainly don't stop them" (p. 125).

God has his purposes—there are reasons he does not hinder every evil choice, but those reasons are as big as the cosmos itself and as specific as the story of every individual person. The web of relationship is much too complex for human wisdom as every person is the "center of another story" that is unknown by others (p. 136).

Everyone's story connects to another story and those connections reverberate throughout the present world and down through history. The Grand Story is much too complex for limited minds such as ours and yet in the midst of that

complexity God pursues his Grand Purpose while at the same time making every human story the focus of his attention. In this sense God permits suffering and evil, like the death of Missy, “for purposes that [Mack] cannot possibly understand now” (p. 222). The world and the story of divine purpose within it are much too complex, too intricate to comprehend. Even if God could explain to us, it is more than we could “imagine or understand” (p. 102).

The Grand Story unfolds the Grand Purpose. God intends to share with humanity “the love and joy and freedom and light that” the Triune fellowship “already knows within” themselves. God created humanity to join their “circle of love.” And, Papa lovingly assures Mack at the breakfast table, “as difficult as it will be for you to understand, everything that has taken place is occurring exactly according to this purpose, without violating choice or will” (p. 125).

Is everything as it is supposed to be? Perhaps not, but everything that happens serves the Grand Purpose of God within the Grand Story God is authoring. As Papa explained to Mack, “your choices are also not stronger than my purposes, and I will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome” (p. 125).

The Grand Purpose ultimately overcomes the Great Sadness. God does not, according to *The Shack*, “orchestrate the tragedies” or cause them but “where there is suffering you will find grace in many facets and colors” (185).

Where was God when Missy was kidnapped? Where was the grace in that? At one level, the divine purpose is much too complicated to unpack, but at another level the grace of God was present to eyes that could see and ears that could hear...even in the dark moment of Missy’s kidnapping.

Do you remember Jesse and Sarah from the campground? They are the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit around the fire the night prior to Missy’s abduction. Sarah is Sarayu, and Jesse is another name for Jesus (as Jesus tells Mack in the cabin, p. 87). This is the couple that Mack immediately liked, who loved on his children, with whom Mack found himself in a conversation that was a “little deeper than he was comfortable with” (p. 37) and who could easily “penetrate his defenses” (p. 38). God was with Mack that morning when Missy went missing—Jesse and Sarah were with him. And when Nan arrived, “Sarah was always there to weep and pray with her”—the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Jesse hugged Mack and “whispered that they would see each other again”—and they did (p. 55).

God's gracious moments are present even in the darkness. Though sometimes disguised, they are present. The hurt blinds us so easily and the woundedness binds us so tightly that the grace is hidden from our sight.

The more our woundedness heals through increasing intimacy with God and with others, the more we are able to see the wounds as part of the process. The journey, in the judgment of *The Shack*, is worth it just as Jesus' own journey through his Great Sadness was worth it (pp. 103, 125). The Grand Purpose within the Grand Story draws us into intimacy—into the “circle of love”—which heals and redeems.

God, as Romans 8:28 promises, is at work in everything for good. But this good is his Grand Purpose, that is, to conform us to the image of his Son. This is the good that God has in mind and not the sorts of things we materialistic, self-serving humans usually have defined as happiness. In God's Grand Purpose, happiness is intimacy with God and not, for example, the accumulation of stuff or even—dare we say it?—the health of our children.

The providential work of God in our lives through our sadnesses, our tragedies, our woundedness, even our sins, draws us deeper into God's own life. God takes our “mess” and “weaves a magnificent tapestry” (p. 176). Progressively, though imperfectly, wounded people can learn to embrace “even the darker shades of life as a part of some incredibly rich and profound tapestry; crafted masterfully by invisible hands of love” (p. 248).

The Grand Purpose of God will even give meaning to the Great Sadness.

Conclusion

The Heart of Spiritual Recovery

Chapter Twenty-Three

"I Will Change Your Name"

When you feel *forsaken* or *rejected*,
 when you feel like a *failure* or a piece of *dirt*,
 when you feel *inadequate* or *deficient*,
 when you feel *unloved* or *unchosen*,
 hear the word of the Lord through Isaiah the prophet

*...you will be called by a new name
 that the mouth of the Lord will bestow...
 No longer will they call you Deserted,
 or name your land Desolate.
 But you will be called Hephzibah ["my delight is in her"],
 and your land Beulah ["married"];
 for the Lord will take delight in you,
 and your land will be married.
 ...as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,
 so will your God rejoice over you.*

Isaiah 62:2b, 4, 5b (TNIV)

Isaiah's message is for post-exilic Israel (Isaiah 56-66). The people had returned from Babylonian exile only to find themselves still oppressed, poor, and seemingly abandoned to their fate. They lived under heavy Persian taxation and were harassed by regional provinces. Jerusalem's walls were in ruins. Famine and poverty were rampant. The return did not meet expectations; it was not all that it was cracked up to be. Where was the glory of the restoration, the return to the land of promise? The promises of God had seemed to fail. Israel had been deserted and the land was desolate; Israel was rejected and ruined. The people of God were losing hope.

Isaiah 56-59 outlined Judah's sins, but Isaiah 60-62 proclaims a message of grace and salvation. Isaiah 62:1-5 is the climax of that message. God will not give up on Israel. He has chosen Jerusalem; it is his city. He will not relent. His love endures for ever. He will change Jerusalem's name, just as he did with Abram, Sarai and Jacob long ago.

Names matter.

God reveals his own character through his names. *Yahweh-Yireh* is the Lord who Provides (Gen 22:14). *Yahweh-Shalom* is the Lord of Wholeness (Judges 6:24). *Yahweh-Mekedesh* is the Lord who Sanctifies (Ezekiel 37:28). The name "Yahweh" means "the one who is" or "I am that I am." The name of God matters as it defines him and our names matter too because they define us.

What others call us matter. They matter because in our woundedness we assimilate those names within ourselves. "Sticks and stones...but names will never hurt me" is a lie. When, as pre-adolescents, we were labeled "different" or "weird" some of us internalized a life-long stigma in our own minds. Such language and experiences shaped our core beliefs. When we were constantly picked last on the playground, we were named "unchosen." When we were abandoned by a parent, we were named "unworthy." When we were abused, we were named "worthless."

What we call ourselves matters. If, at our cores, we call ourselves "worthless," "unloved," or "pathetic," it will shape how we relate to people. It will shape the nature of our marriages, our parenting and our relationships. It will shape our churches. Indeed, self-righteousness within churches is often more a matter of maintaining a self-image and ignoring the truth about themselves than it is about the welcoming, forgiving holiness of God.

What God calls us truly matters. And it matters more than our own inadequate and inaccurate views of ourselves. How we hear God—the sieve through which we filter God's word to us—often twists God's naming. Though intellectually we may hear God say "beloved," if our core is filled with shame, hurt, pain and abandonment and if our image of God has been shaped by pictures of Zeus holding lightning bolts eager! to inflict retribution, what we hear is not "beloved" but "loathed." Since we believe—at our core or gut—that we are not worth loving, we cannot believe that God could actually love us in the midst of our shame, abandonment, and sin.

How do I name myself?

Only recently have I recognized with any depth the significance of other's names for us and our names for ourselves. In recent months I have discovered that at my core—in my own self-image—I had lived with some names that have negatively impacted me. Whether self-generated, or imposed by others, or impressed upon me by circumstances, these names nearly destroyed me in 2008. Here are a few of my "old" names for myself.

Forsaken. I felt this intensely when Sheila died in 1980 after only two years and eleven months of marriage. I felt it again when Joshua was diagnosed with a terminal genetic defect and then died at the age of sixteen in 2001. Why, God, have you forsaken me? Will you forsake me forever? Why are you picking on me? Is there something wrong with me that you rip my joy from me and every day fill my heart with sorrow?

Failure. I have felt this most deeply since my divorce. I failed at the most important relationship in my life. During that trauma I was disillusioned, confused, and deeply hurt. I now own much more of the causes of that divorce than I did in 2001, but this only increases my sense of failure. The name, seemingly, only gets more appropriate with time.

Deficient. One of my early core beliefs is "I am not enough." Consequently, emotionally I have sought approval and the most effective mode for that was through work. Approval-seeking became an addiction. I am a workaholic. I stuffed myself with addictive behavior in order to feel good about myself, to gain approval, and connect with others. But ultimately it was an empty feeling. Whatever approval I received was never enough; I always needed more and was envious when others received acclaim. And I needed more because at my core—somehow, someway—I had been named "Deficient."

What is your name? How have you been named? What have you felt in your gut and believed at your core that has shaped how you see yourself, others and God? I am only beginning to understand the names I have worn. But I know there is something better. God himself has named me. Those are the names I want to internalize. I want to see myself and others through the lens of God's naming.

God changes names!

Israel and I have chewed some of the same dirt. Forsaken...Rejected...Desolate. Indeed, we have all worn these names in one form or another. But there is good news—there is gospel. God changes names and only he can truly do so. To try to change my own name is an illusion, futile and another attempt to fill what is lacking by my own efforts. God must name me and, when he names me, he actualizes it—he makes it true.

Isaiah provides a startling image for us that enables us to enter this story emotionally as well as intellectually. Yahweh's new name for Israel is "My delight is in her"—the one in whom he delights. He loves her, enjoys being with

her, and yearns for her presence. Yahweh's name for Israel is "Married"—he unites himself with his people for the sake of intimacy; he wants to know his bride. Yahweh rejoices over his people like a bridegroom rejoices over his bride—his joy surpasses a wedding celebration. He joins in the wedding dance and surrounds his bride with love,

This is how God feels. This is the truth about his people. "I will rejoice over you," declares Yahweh. The king of the cosmos does not sit on his throne without emotional engagement with his creation. Quite the contrary, God chooses his bride, delights in her, dresses her in a bridal gown, and celebrates her with dancing and festivity.

This is how God feels about us. Our past self-styled names are false names—they are no longer true if they ever were. We have new names—names bestowed by God. No longer are we "Forsaken" but we are "Chosen." No longer are we "Failure" but we are "Married." No longer are we "Deficient" but we are "Blessed"! Though he knows the depths of our hearts (which are not always pretty), he loves us just as he loves his own Son (John 17:23).

God's word to each of us, as it was to Jesus, is "You are beloved; you are the one in whom I delight." He welcomes us, dresses us in festive robes, spreads a table of the best food and the finest wines, and spends the evening dancing with his bride. God wants us and he stands in applause as we wear the names he has given us....Chosen...Beloved...Married...Blessed.

The lyrics of D. J. Butler's "I Will Change Your Name" speak the essence of this text; hear them, believe them. It is the word of God through Isaiah to each of us.

*I will change your name
You shall no longer be called
Wounded, outcast, lonely or afraid.*

*I will change your name
Your new name shall be
Confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one
Faithfulness, friend of God
One who seeks My face.*

Chapter Twenty-Four

You Are Loved!

You have loved them even as you have loved me.

John 17:23 (NIV)

One Wednesday evening in November of 2008 I was blessed to hear Terry Smith teach. Terry is one of the ministers of the Woodmont Hills Family of God in Nashville (Tennessee) and is one of God's precious messengers who has ministered to me in my brokenness and helped me in my own spiritual recovery.

Terry stressed that we are each beloved by God. That is sometimes difficult to believe. One close friend confided in me that he, too, finds it difficult. But he can approach it something like this. John 3:16 says that God loves the world— inclusive of all the people who have committed even the most atrocious evils, and the world includes him—and me. God loves us even when we don't love ourselves or others. John 3:16 includes me.

But from that particular evening when Terry spoke, one line has stuck with me in a special way. It was a text that Terry emphasized that night. It is a line from John 17 that I had read many times, but that night I experienced it in a new way. I believe it began to sink deep into my heart. I want it to sink even deeper.

In my thinking and teaching about John 17 I have regularly underscored the love the Father and the Son have for each other and how God seeks to draw us into the circle of their love. The Father and Son intend for us to experience the love that they share. As John 17:26 states, we are designed (created for the purpose!) to know (experience and enjoy!) the love that the Father has for the Son. We are created to dwell in the love of the Father and Son.

But Terry stressed a different line in this prayer—different even from the laudable and traditional emphasis on unity from John 17:20-21 that has characterized most lessons I have heard from John 17.

Terry stressed a single declarative statement in John 17:23. Jesus says to the Father, "*you have loved them even as you have loved me.*"

Wow! Let that sink in. Dwell on it for a moment. Take some time to let that ping throughout the corners of your brain...and your heart...and your gut.

I had read it before...many times...many, many times. I had read it more times than I could possibly remember and even translated it from Greek on multiple occasions. For the first time that night, perhaps, I really felt it in my gut.

The Father loves the disciples just as he loves Jesus. Yes, the disciples. The tax collector? The sinful, cursing, impetuous fisherman sarcastically (perhaps) named "the rock"? The Zealot—the political agitator? Judas the betrayer, no, the betrayers!? They all betrayed him; they all ran eventually. They would all hide.

The Father loves the disciples just as he loves Jesus. He loves screw-ups (like Mack...like me). He loves those who don't understand him. He loves those who betray his Son. He loves those who live in fear rather than faith. He loves them in their brokenness, their humanity, their finitude, even in their sin.

The Father loves the disciples just as he loves Jesus. No more, no less. God is love, and the love between the Father and the Son is the love with which he loves the disciples. The disciples are loved, even when they don't feel loved and know they are loved.

The Father loves me just as he loves Jesus. Can it really be true? Surely not! I have screwed-up so many times. I am broken. I know myself too well. But the Father knows me, too. And he loves me just the same...even as he loves his only Son. Because God loves me I am worthy of love!

The Father loves me just as he loves Jesus. What a wondrous thought; what a powerful, transforming truth! This is the truth I need to believe; this is the truth that needs to sink deep within me. This is the truth that should shape my heart, ground my security, and produce my joy. This love is what is really real; it is the truth of the gospel. It is the truth that is the foundation of a redeemed cosmos. My Father loves me just like he loves Jesus.

It is not really a new truth, of course. But it entered my heart and gut in a new way that evening. It is the kind of newness that I need every day. I need to hear that truth anew every day and know deep within me that the mercies of God are new every morning.

With this truth I can crawl into my Father's lap, trust in his care, and feel his loving arms enwrap me. Thank you, Father.

Thank you, Jesus, for demonstrating that love at the cross.

Thank you, Holy Spirit, for pouring that love into my heart.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Faith Instead of Fear: Learning to Trust God

*They will have no fear of bad news;
their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the Lord.*

Psalm 112:7 (TNIV)

Our God is often too small and our pride too big.

Our pride generates either folly or fear. Our pride may so blind us that we live arrogantly, self-righteously and judgmentally—but we are so prideful that we don't even see our faults. This is the definition of folly.

For others pride generates fear because we want control but we recognize that we do not have control. We think that if we can control the circumstances of our lives, we can eliminate fear and generate our own serenity. Pride cannot admit that we are not in control; pride cannot confess powerlessness.

To confess pride opens the door for trust.

We humans have a tendency to think that God can only do what we can imagine, what we can think up for ourselves. Somehow, we think, God is limited by our own imagination. As Papa explained to Mack, "You try to make sense of the world in which you live based on a very small and incomplete picture of reality." And even that picture is filtered through the lens of "hurt, pain, self-centeredness, and power" (p. 126).

Ultimately, this creates fear as we seek to manipulate and control the world around us. But we soon discover that we are unable to control it or even make sense of it. That generates more fear. The more we fear the more we want to control and the more we recognize that we are powerless the more we want to control. This degenerative cycle produces isolation, distrust and/or unbelief.

Pain, brokenness, and woundedness confirm our powerlessness and fear dominates as we wait for the proverbial "next shoe to drop." We live by fear rather than by trust; we live by sight rather than by faith.

To confess fear opens the door for faith.

How do we learn to trust when we live with so much fear?

On the one hand, learning to trust is unlearning self-reliance; learning to trust is learning dependence. Our self-reliance is ingrained but it is this very self-reliance (pride) which is the soil in which fear is planted. Since fear is selfish and self-centered, we unlearn fear through depending on another.

It is the strange nature of the world that the very hurts and pains that generate fear are the very tools God uses to help us unlearn our self-reliance.

On the other hand, learning to trust is a proactive process. Like taking our first steps as a baby, we learn to walk surrounded by the love of parents and encouragers. We step out...we put our foot forward...in faith. We stumble and we sometimes fall, but we keep walking till we learn to run.

Learning to trust is relational rather than cognitive. It is not about how much we know but about how much we connect. It is not so much about mechanics (a kind of “how to trust” manual) as it is about intimacy.

Intimacy is something we learn through active connection with others. While *The Shack* has sometimes been criticized for its neglect of community (e.g., some see a negative view of “church” in the book), Young stresses the importance of relationships. Intimacy is about relationships rather than institutions, about connectedness rather than structures. Intimacy can certainly happen within structures or institutions (or within “church”), but intimacy does not happen because of them. Intimacy is truly being present with another—transparent and open. That cannot be structured or institutionalized.

This is what Mack learned over the weekend—what Paul Young learned through ten years of recovery. Learning to trust God means being with God—openly, honestly and intentionally. Mack learned how to be intimate by participating in the intimacy of the Father, Son and Spirit. He learned to trust God by being with God.

That is well and good for a parable, but what does it mean for me? I have not yet had a vision like Mack. Rightly or wrongly, I don’t expect one. But what I do have is the historic practices of believers through the ages who have experienced God through intentional spiritual habits. Through solitude, silence, simplicity of

life, prayer, meditation, Scripture reading, etc., they have encountered God. They have learned to be with God, rest upon his breast and trust him.

My good friend Terry Smith practices being with God every morning. He sits in his morning meditation chair and with sanctified imagination envisions the Triune God as sitting with him. He addresses the Father, then the Son and then the Spirit. He reads the word of God. He listens. He speaks. He enjoys. He begins his day with an intimate experience of God. I have often followed his example.

This was Mack's experience. Rising from his bed, he went to the breakfast table where he sat with God—Papa, Jesus and Sarayu. He talked. He listened. He wept. He questioned. And he learned to trust.

We cannot learn to trust if we are never with God. If we never intentionally seek God's presence or seek the intimacy of the Triune God, we continue to live in fear rather than faith.

But this is difficult for many people. It has often been difficult for me. When I am so shut down emotionally in my relationships with others, how can I ever experience or know that it means or feels like to be intimate with God? Intimacy with others teaches us how to be intimate with God or at least teaches us what intimacy is.

This is why we need community. We need "church"—not because of the institution, structures or buildings. We need community (church) because we learn intimacy by being with others. This is one reason 12-step or AA meetings (in whatever form they come) are so powerful. They form community, practice intimacy as they share their lives, and develop our ability to trust.

Church has often failed miserably at this but most often because we have misidentified "church" with its institutional trappings. When we think of church as a community of fellow believers—indeed, fellow sinners—who seek intimacy with God, perhaps we can learn to walk with each other in grace, forgiveness and accountability.

And when church comes together as whole (like on a Sunday morning for most traditions), it comes together to listen to God, to talk with God, to eat and drink with God at Jesus' table and enjoy God. It comes *together*—yes, as a community—to share the Triune intimacy *together*.

But we cannot develop intimacy with others simply through large communal experiences like Sunday morning assemblies. We truly learn intimacy in small settings where we share our hearts, our lives and our secrets.

When we let other people into our shacks, when we let them see who we really are, what we really believe and value, then we experience intimacy. And when we experience authentic intimacy, then we know what love is.

When I have risked opening my shack up to other people in intimate settings—and it is a risk because we are uncertain how they will react, what they will say, or what they will do—I have experienced acceptance, forgiveness and love in my church community.

When we experience love we can lean to trust as others love and trust us. “Trust,” Papa told Mack, “is the fruit or a relationship in which you know you are loved” (p. 126). When we are loved, we can trust. And the more we receive and give love the less room there is for fear and the ability to give and receive love grows. Fear dissipates as love increases; there is no room for fear when the heart is filled with love.

God, community and intimate friends can repair our “trusters.” For many people in their woundedness their “trusters” are broken. They don’t know how to trust or even what it feels like to trust another person. They do not trust because they don’t feel loved. We trust when we know we are loved.

Living in an accepting, welcoming and open community, living with close and intimate friends, and intentionally seeking God through solitude and silence, we learn to trust again because we know we are loved.

We turn fears into trust when we turn cares into prayers. And we pray because we know we are loved.

When our God is too small and our pride is too big, fear dominates. But when we confess God as big (the creator, lover and redeemer) and we as small (creature, loved, and sinner), trust grows in our hearts.

God is big and we are small. Therefore, we trust.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Circle of Love: Turning Mourning into Dancing

*You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing.
You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy.*

Psalm 30:11 (NLT)

The beginning and end of *The Shack* stand in radical contrast. At the beginning of the story Mack's appearance was brooding, dark and disturbing but at the end he is vibrant, loving, and accepting. In the beginning his relationship with God was "wide" but after a weekend at the shack it had gone "deep" (p. 11). Mack's weekend encounter with God at the shack was transformative.

Some have judged the parable too rosy in its ending, too facile, too ideal. Some have almost ridiculed the idea that a weekender with God could solve all one's problems. While the story is not that artificial, we should remember that the weekend is actually an account or summary of Young's ten year journey into spiritual recovery.

His mourning was not turned into dancing over a weekend but through a long ten year journey of reconciliation with wife and family, prolonged therapy and focused spiritual discipline. The weekender in *The Shack* may seem glib or fanciful but it is actually a summary of ten years of spiritual recovery.

The point is that God does turn mourning into dancing. God can change us; God can transform us. God can make light shine in the darkness. God can change our clothes.

It does not seem possible, however, when we are mourning. It can seem hopeless. We cannot imagine that we will ever see happiness again even when we fool ourselves into believing that better days are coming.

Mourning comes from at least two sources. Mourning descends on us because the Great Sadness in our lives blinds us to the vibrant colors of life. The Great Sadness breaks our "trusts" because we feel unloved. The tragedies and traumas of our wounded lives strip us of the ability to trust because we believe that our woundedness means we are unloved and perhaps even unlovable.

Mourning also descends on us because we feel like miserable failures that disappoint others, ourselves and even God. We are often people who live by rules rather than living in relationships. We judge our worth on our ability to live by the rules, to be successful, to make something ourselves, to gain the approval of others or to please others. We get our value from performance rather than love. Indeed, we tend to think that we make ourselves lovable when we perform well.

Religion addicts are particularly adept at such thinking as are others (like workaholics, for example). In our heads we know that God loves us despite our performance but in our guts we believe that our performance is what really counts and that if we don't perform God would not love us—or at least wouldn't love us as much.

Somehow, somehow we learned that how well we are doing in life (are our children healthy? how successful is our work? no big tragedies, no big mistakes) is the judge of how much we are loved. Somehow, somehow we learned—in our guts though our heads denied it—that God loves only those who perform well. Our loveability—whether we were worthy of love or not—depended on how well we knew the rules and how well we kept them. And if we keep the rules—if we please God!—then life should be rosy, undisturbed by tragedy and successful.

It is no wonder that we live in fear—we are ultimately afraid that God does not really love us. We compensate by studying the rules, living by the rules and enforcing the rules on others. Rather than helping, we become judgmental, vindictive (just downright mean at times) and miserable people—if not on the outside, on the inside. And the reason is, as Sarayu told Mack, “there is no mercy or grace in rules, not even for one mistake” (p. 202).

The Shack addresses this head-on. *How do wounded people come to believe that God really is “especially fond” of them?* Young's parable was written to answer that question, and we have come back to it time and again throughout this book. It is the fundamental question that opens the door for relationship, intimacy and joy. When wounded people come to believe that God is “especially fond” of them, it turns their mourning into dancing.

Mack's “weekend” with God, Papa comforted Mackenzie, was “about relationship and love” (p. 102). It was not about rules and performance. Papa

wanted Mack to know that “our relationship is not about performance or you having to please me” as if she were some “self-centered demanding little deity insisting” on her own way (p. 126). An authentic sense of pleasing God does not arise out of the demands of performance but out of the experience of loving in relationship.

But this is very hard to grasp. It is a prolonged discussion between Mack and the Triune God. If performance is not the key, then why does God love us “when [we] have nothing to offer” him (p. 200)? But that God loves us when we have nothing to offer him—nothing that would complete him or add worth to him—is, in fact, the very thing that “alleviate[s] any pressure to perform” (p. 201).

God loves us because that is who he is. God—Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu—are a circle of love. They are love; God is love. God loves because of who he is not because of how well we have performed. We are worthy of love because God has loved us. God created us as the center of the circle of their love.

This is the circle we are invited to join. It is a circle engaged in the joyful dance of love.

I love the visual image of people dancing in a circle whether it is a Greek dance like in the film *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* or a Jewish dance like in the *Fiddler on the Roof*. Joined in hand, filled with joy, they circle the center. Those scenes tap into a deep desire to join the dance and feel the joy.

This is the dance of the Triune God. And we—yes, astoundingly, *we*—are the center of that circle. We are the center of God’s love and relationship. We are the focus of God’s Grand Purpose. We are loved and celebrated; we are God’s delight. We are beloved!

Moreover, we join God in the “circle of relationship” (p. 146). We join the dance. As dancers—as participants—we encircle others who have yet to join. We love them that they might know that they too are the center of God’s love and we invite them to join the dance.

We become not merely passive recipients of God’s Grand Purpose but we become participants in the mission of God to encircle every human being with the love of God that they, too, might join the dance.