

A Conversation With Mike Yaconelli

Interviewed by Michael J. Cusick

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At fifty-two, Mike Yaconelli is refreshingly unstable. Though he defies being easily categorized, at times his spiritual lexicon lists words more familiar to a Trappist monk or a Buddhist than an evangelical Christian. But Yaconelli is passionate about the gospel. And he is nothing if not a walking contradiction. A former student at Bob Jones University, but profoundly influenced by the spirituality of Henry Nouwen. An outspoken, often controversial, critic of the church, but a pastor with great affection for the church through which he ministers to the unchurched and irreligious. He calls himself an evangelist, but says he doesn't do evangelism. Go figure.

As we talk over breakfast at the *National Youth Workers Convention* in San Diego, Yaconelli inconspicuously turns an invisible key, accelerates, and shifts into high gear. In a matter of minutes my interview questions have gone up in smoke. The words intense and passionate come to mind but are quickly dismissed for their obvious inadequacy to describe our time together. Clearly, this is a man who has broken the mold of evangelical leadership.

Considered by many to be an expert on the effects of western culture on young people, Mike has authored, co-authored, and edited a number of books including *The Door Interviews*, *Teaching the Truth about Sex, Play It, and Get 'Em Talking*. Though his name may not appear on the top ten list at the local Christian bookstore, his influence is wide and chances are someone you know has been touched by Mike Yaconelli's life. In 1969 he co-founded *Youth Specialties*, an international organization which trains and equips youth workers around the globe. Twice each year *Youth Specialties* holds The National Youth Workers Convention, a bi-coastal training and renewal conference for youth workers from around the country. In fact, *Youth Specialties* services over 70,000 organizations, including the YMCA, Boy Scouts of America, The United States Air Force, the Salvation Army, and thousands of churches.

For the uninitiated, Mike is perhaps best known as the Senior Editor of *The Door*, a bimonthly Christian periodical in its twenty-fourth year that boasts interviews with such divergent types as Jerry Falwell, Tiny Tim, Mr. Rogers, Madeleine L'Engle, and Rush Limbaugh. Yaconelli, who describes *The Door* as "the perfect gift for the closed mind," contributes regularly through *The Back Door*, an editorial hybrid of personal reflection, cultural commentary, and raw iconoclasm. A random sampling of past *Back Door* titles include: "Annoying Faith," "Do I Have

A Drinking Problem?”, “I’m Running As Fast As I Can,” and “Religious Bounty Hunters.” When I caught up with Mike I found him to be brutally honest, boldly provocative, deeply spiritual and surprisingly tender.

Mars Hill: Your good friend Brennan Manning has described *The Door* as “biting, irreverent, satirical, often serious, occasionally sophomoric, frequently hilarious, never dull, frequently provocative, surprisingly spiritual . . . my favorite subscription.” How would you describe *The Door* and why it exists?

MY: I don’t know how I would describe *The Door*, but at this moment it exists to do a number of things. First, it’s there to say to people that they are not crazy. To encourage people and let them know that although the people around them may not see things the way they do, there are people who do. It lets them know that you can have a faith that questions and thinks critically, a faith that does not airbrush reality. It lets them know that it’s not necessary for Christians to pretend that we don’t have faults and don’t make mistakes. *The Door* really exists to say, “There’s nothing wrong with admitting our flaws.” *The Door* doesn’t diminish the gospel, although it does diminish the institutionalized church and certain personalities. It diminishes our worship of people and actual institutions and events. For example, we did an article on Promise Keepers and we have been deluged with people who were shocked and offended. It was almost as if we had attacked a sacred cow, that we had gone too far. The outcry wasn’t just from rabid right-wingers, but from long-time *Door* subscribers. People were saying, “How can you do that? How could you even think about that? How can you criticize an organization that obviously has done wonderful things?”

Mars Hill: Is the role of satire and irreverence to jar institutions that take themselves too seriously?

MY: Yes, but I think *The Door* is not as biting as it used to be, nor do we want it to be. I do think that any organization, no matter which one it is, that takes itself so seriously that people cannot poke fun at it or caricature certain parts of the organization, is already in major trouble. If Promise Keepers is afraid of being made fun of or being criticized, they are already in deep trouble. There are some good things happening with Promise Keepers, but there are also some problems. Another thing that I think *The Door* does is try to provide a unique view of the gospel. I think that out of all the things I would say about *The Door*, it has a kind of realism or rawness about it that is a consequence of the gospel. In the presence of the gospel we can do nothing but be honest. To the best of our ability, *The Door* attempts to take an honest look at the world and the gospel. And that is a very healthy, liberating thing.

Mars Hill: I would agree that in the last few years *The Door* is far less biting and cynical. How do you account for the changes from a cynical, biting, critique of the church and its institutions to where you are now?

MY: I think I'm older and more aware that a lot of my anger was misdirected and misplaced. A lot of my anger toward the church was really a symptom of a deeper anger that became harmful. I'm still not sure I've figured all that out. But I had to begin to focus upon the gospel and my own relationship with Christ. I want to continue moving in the direction of being more positive and contributing to the gospel. Our recent re-interviews with Frederick Buechner and Richard Selzer are a prime example of what *The Door* really ought to be about. Honest, fresh, new ways of looking at the truth that are encouraging, helpful, startling, and at times threatening and dangerous. That's what I believe truth should be about. When you're in the presence of truth you are nervous. It's a scary place to be.

Mars Hill: I understand that *The Door* has branched out beyond the printed page. What was it like to experiment with television as a medium to communicate those same ideas?

MY: We actually did a pilot episode for *Door T.V.* I have really mixed feelings about it because I'm not sure it's worth spending so much money just to have a television show. I also discovered, shockingly, how easy it is to use television to manipulate reality. I knew television distorted reality, but I had no idea just how much. You really have to lie in order for something to be good T.V. You really have to manipulate reality in order for something to look as if it's real. For example, we wanted to do a story on a Christian miniature golf course called "Uncle Budet's Gospel Golf Course" which doesn't even operate anymore. So we went out, cut all the bushes away, and made it look really good. Even though the golf course was run down, it actually looked new because television softens reality. It made great television. So we filmed the gospel miniature golf course and then we interviewed the guy who came up with the idea for the course. This man is his own caricature. He was a satire of himself. But after we finished filming the story, I realized how dangerous television is because we could have made him look like an absolute moron. We could have destroyed him, devastated him. Not by altering what he said, but by editing what he said. Or, as a producer told me, we could make him somewhat sympathetic, where you wouldn't agree with him, but you might feel a little bit sorry for him because of what he was trying to do.

Mars Hill: What was he trying to do?

MY: He was trying to use the miniature golf course as an evangelistic tool. His line was, "You start at the garden of Eden, you go to Hell, and you end up in Heaven." He had the tomb of Jesus which looked like a 1957 camper shell. He had a stairway of the ten commandments with a commandment on each stair, but he couldn't spell adultery. And using the Lord's name in vain became "Don't Cuss!"

At one hole they had Jesus standing up with his hand raised, but all of his fingers were broken off. We were going to have the commentator walk by and say,

“Apparently Jesus was involved in a bizarre carpentry accident.” It was natural humor that was really good, but we had to cut that line because you couldn't see it.

If you want to do good television though, you have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars. When they told me that, I said, “That's stupid, what does it cost for a camera and some videotape?” It was amazing to learn that to do a good half-hour of television would cost between one hundred and two hundred thousand dollars. The short lived show *T. V. Nation* cost four hundred thousand dollars an episode and it died. It died because people aren't interested in humor where you have to think. People don't want to think.

I did an editorial thing on T.V. like *The Back Door*. All I did was tell one story. But telling a story on television is very difficult; it's not like doing it in print. The producer said, “Okay, that was great. The only problem is that it's two minutes and forty-five seconds long and it needs to be cut down to one minute.” Do you know what you do to a story when it's a minute long? There's no story left! And we do that all the time with illustrations and sermons.

Mars Hill: My mind went to the sermon too. We've transformed the pulpit into an opportunity for a weekly spiritual sound bite where sermons are more like infomercials, convincing us to buy a product we really don't think we need.

MY: It's even worse than that. We take a Bible story, or a story that has happened to us or someone we know, and then we edit it so that it makes a good story. We condense and alter it so that it starts slow, builds, and ends up with a kind of climax to it. Nobody lives like that. Nobody lives life where everything builds to a gigantic conclusion. Yet you and I hear this over and over again in the church. We hear it in the sermon and in the books we read. We begin to think that life is actually lived like that. It's no wonder that most of us are depressed, that most of us are dishonest, that most of us refuse to talk about our faith, or that we've dropped out of the church and no longer have a faith. People want to have a faith, but they are tired of lying. People are tired of pretending that their lives are better than they actually are. I'm convinced that there are thousands of people in this culture who would give anything to go to church and have faith, but they will not go because they have too much integrity. They don't want to go because they have to be dishonest and pretend that everything is okay.

Mars Hill: I have unbelieving friends who would never consider going to church for that very reason, and they have all but used those very words.

MY: We are told that when Jesus comes into your life he takes all the disparities, all the odd ups-and-downs of life, all your struggles, and gives you balance. That's baloney--it's a lie. I think Jesus makes our lives lopsided and crazy.

Mars Hill: Is that what you meant when you wrote, “Jesus is the author of

Discontent?"

MY: Yes. According to most evangelicals you can't be extreme, you can't have any anxiety; you have to be in control, everything has to fit, and everything has to make sense. Christianity has to work. Nobody lives like that. I just noticed that Mother Theresa forgave a British columnist for writing a terrible article about her. He had said that she seeks out the press and that she was a publicity hound. Well, I don't know whether it's true or not, but my hunch has always been that as great as Mother Theresa may be, and as much as she does the work of God, you probably wouldn't want to work for her. She is probably very demanding. That's what makes her so good at what she does. She's focused. And that's why some of the pastors of these mega-churches are workaholics. They are driven and out of balance, but everyone thinks they're in great shape.

Mars Hill: Isn't it true though that we want to believe that somebody has it together, that even under the veneer, somebody, somewhere, has it all together?

MY: Sadly, yes. But what is faith? Is faith fixing everything? Or is faith a kind of deep trust in the erratic, lopsided, crazy, spontaneity of life. Or is it recognizing that in the fog of everydayness, God is at work and that he is actually doing something in me and in you that can be trusted. But instead, the idea of balance becomes a sort of tyranny. I'm convinced that evangelicals in particular are tyrannized by this concept of balance. Our lives have got to work, be fulfilling, and look so good. Nobody lives like that though and nobody experiences that in their own life.

Mars Hill: Say more about the fact that there are so many people out there who have too much integrity to have faith and be involved in the church.

MY: I have always been convinced that I never have to tell anybody that they have sinned. I don't have to say to a person, "Gee, you don't live up to what God expects out of all of us." And then they respond, "What... You're kidding!" That isn't the problem. People are very well aware of their sin, their shortcomings, their failures, their mistakes, their emptiness, their loneliness, and their lostness. But too many times the church says to them, "If you're empty and lonely, lost, confused, and have questions. . . come to the church and we'll get rid of all those things." So people come to the church and try it, but they end up still having emptiness, doubts, and loneliness, and they say, "Apparently, I didn't do it right. I didn't listen to the right tapes, or go to the right seminar .. I give up... I quit." I'm convinced that most people are looking for something that says, "You're not alone, you are loved in spite of the flaws and the junk in your life." People want to know that there is hope out there and that some sense can be made out of life. That their small life with its little bit of everydayness can actually make a difference and have a kind of power and authority.

What characterizes Christianity in 1995 is realness and honesty with yourself and

God. It's not your stance on abortion, or homosexuality, or some political issue; it's that you tell the truth. And that as much as you know how, as honest as you know how to be, God will honor that. You can trust that. I've got five children and they are in all stages of response to the gospel. But that will change in five years when the ones who seem to have it all together will be falling apart and the ones who don't have it all together are going to be further along. As a parent I want them to all be in the Kingdom. I want them to be following Jesus. I want them to be living on the forefront of the gospel, but they're not there. So what do I do as a parent? Do I keep calling them up? Do I keep sending them letters trying to evangelize them? Or do I trust the Truth? They've seen it in me--I've been divorced, the absolute unpardonable sin. Will they be able to see Jesus in the midst of my brokenness and flaws? The answer is absolutely! I trust that and I will go all the way to my grave believing that.

Mars Hill: It seems that there is a growing recognition and acceptance in the church of needing to be honest and have authenticity, to face reality. How can the church increase the honesty and decrease the pretending?

MY: We never will because everything is corrupted. You'll always have pockets of honesty and pockets of pretending. But that's the great joy of the church and the great calling of the church. Both can co-exist. But then somebody comes along with a glimmer of the truth and all of a sudden it's being franchised. It becomes a seminar, a book, or a tape, and then it loses its authenticity. I frankly think that the great power of *The Door* was when nobody got one. It was xeroxed and passed out to friends. People would say, "Have you seen the latest *Door*?" And they would say, "No." So people had to tell about it; they had to retell the stories over and over again. Today though we are in a different place than in the sixties. Today, there is enough money around that if somebody comes around with a glimpse of the truth that sounds fresh and new, the next thing you know it becomes an industry or a business. Then the whole thing is altered and changed and suddenly it loses its life and its power.

Mars Hill: You obviously have something to say. Is that why you haven't written more?

MY: People keep telling me that I need to write a book. "Write this, write that, put all the *Back Doors* together and write a book." But maybe I don't need to! Maybe *The Back Door* is enough every few months. Maybe I'm not the guy who writes books. Maybe I'm the guy who writes little articles here and there and then I disappear. Maybe that's my power.

I've been thinking lately that I would love to have a half-dozen people that I would just write letters to and have an ongoing correspondence with. I could say, "What do you think about this?" Off the letter goes and then they write me back. It would be hard though because good writing takes a long time. It takes a day to write a good letter. If you've got six people you're writing letters to that would take six

days. Most people would say that's a waste of time. "Hey Mike, what did you do today?" "Uh, I wrote a letter."

Mars Hill: We automatically measure things in those kind of pragmatic terms, don't we? We want to quantify how the power of God works.

MY: A charitable trust recently paid for me to come and talk to a bunch of youth directors about where youth ministry is going in the future. I was late because the motor on the plane broke, so the first hour the manager of the trust got up and talked about measurable goals, how to achieve, and how to get results. He talked about how there were 17 really powerful churches in one concentrated area, but that if you looked at the statistics you would see that in that area divorce still went up, crime was still up, and that obviously, the church wasn't making any difference. The discussion went on concerning how we make a difference. At the end of this time they said they needed to have a lot more measurable goals and accountability. I finally got up to speak, sensing that this had happened, I asked, "Would you please explain to me how you measure the fact that I spent three years with a high school kid when he walked right out of my life, got on drugs, and got his girlfriend pregnant? Fifteen years later something clicked in his mind and he came back to Jesus. I have no idea where the kid is, he's lost touch with me, he's never written me a letter. How do you measure that? Please, tell me how you measure that?"

A friend of *Youth Specialties*, Lorraine Monroe, teaches English in Harlem. She had a student that was genuinely very bright. They were going through Shakespeare and he kept getting 70%. His whole senior year he got 70% grades and he barely graduated. She knew he was capable of better than that, and she tried everything she could to get him going, but nothing worked. He left the school and she lost track of him. Well, ten years later she runs into him and he's got his Ph.D. in English and is teaching literature. He asked her if she remembered him from his senior year. She said, "Remember you, how could I forget you! You wasted your brilliant intellect and you only gave me 70%." He looked at her and said, "Mrs. Monroe, seventy percent was 100% of all I could give you then. My parents had just divorced, my brother was on drugs, and it was all I could do to get up in the morning and go to your class. I was giving you 100%; it just looked like 70%." Tell me, how do you measure that?

The reason I ran for the school board in the little town where I live is because we can't always measure what is 100% and what isn't. School is not about straight A's and high SAT's; it's about calling. Christians are much more interested in calling. The big mistake of most Christian colleges and universities is that they have totally missed out on why they exist. They do not exist to give you a degree; they exist to help you discover your calling.

Mars Hill: Say more about what you mean by calling.

MY: What I mean by calling is what you were meant to be and where you belong. There are a whole lot of people who are reading this interview who need to quit their jobs and start writing because that's where they belong. Or they need to recognize that the job they have is basically their prostitution--it's what they do to give them money to do what they really want to do. So I prostitute myself by putting in my eight hours or my forty hours to earn enough money to do what I really want to do.

Mars Hill: It sounds like you're saying it's far more than what you do, but that it's who you are.

MY: Absolutely. It's who you are. And it's more than gifts. I live in this little town of five thousand people. You would come and look around and say, "You're kidding, why do you live here?" My answer would be, "I don't know." A group of people called me there, I went, and I discovered something. I discovered that one of the great joys of ministry is that I get to do funerals when I didn't even know I liked to do them. I just had to do one last week. The crazy thing is that I pastor a church for people who don't like to go to church and the mortician in my town knows that. So when somebody dies and they don't list a church he says, "Call Yaconelli." So I get to do all these horrible funerals where kids die by suicide, drugs, and people with no church backgrounds. I walk in the room and I think, "I belong here... I know what to do." I didn't know that I knew what to do but I do. I just did a funeral for some people who were Catholic. These people's son committed suicide in 1982. They were devastated. They went to the church to arrange the funeral and the church said, "Sorry, you can't have the funeral because you haven't kept up with us." Now, would you tell me how I can do a funeral and not tell that story? I had to tell that story. I didn't want to, but you have to tell the truth at funerals.

Creating an eulogy is such a wonderful thing, such a joy. You have to create the memory of this person as they were. It's a challenge; it's work. You have to interview people who don't want to be interviewed, and make them tell you stories they don't want to tell you. You know that nobody's telling you the whole story because at every funeral I've ever done the person could have been a terrible person all their life but you hear, "They were so wonderful, they were the most giving person." You have to sift through all that. Of course you don't mention every flaw they have, but you allude to them and include that in the picture. The one book I want to write is "How to Do a Funeral" because all the stuff they have out on funerals is just junk. You always look for that defining story, the glimpse into who they really were, and then you go with that. People always ask me, "What if they weren't a Christian or professed to be and there's nothing that indicates that they are? What do you do?" Well, what I do is err on the side of grace. How do I know what happened in his heart? I don't know what's going on there. So with the young man who committed suicide, here's how I ended the sermon. I said, "There were two Brian's. There was the Brian we all

knew and there was the Brian we didn't know. And the Brian we didn't know was stronger than the Brian we did know, and that Brian took his own life." I said that all I could think about was the Prodigal Son as he walks along saying, "I can never go back home, my Dad's never going to take me back, I've really blown it this time, I intentionally robbed my inheritance, I wasn't blinded, I wasn't seduced or led into it by someone who came along and took control of my senses, I knew what I was doing and I did it intentionally." I picture him wandering back saying, "I've gone too far this time." I said, "I can see Brian saying, 'Oh God, I've gone too far and I've blown it.' But then, all of a sudden, he looks up and there's Jesus. And Jesus says, 'Brian, nobody goes too far.'" Now, what am I suggesting? Am I suggesting that he is in heaven? I guess I am. So if I'm wrong and if I err on the side of grace, then I err on the side of grace.

Mars Hill: *Christianity Today* once referred to you as an iconoclast. Is that an accurate description of who you are?

MY: I don't even know what iconoclast means. I hate it when I'm called a rebel or a radical. I'm not radical and I don't live in a cave somewhere. I have a real nice house and I like nice things. I'm not twenty anymore; I'm fifty two and I have three kids I'm trying to get through college. But I will say this: I love the church, and I love it so much that I'm going to say to everybody that I'm worried about what the church has become. I'm an evangelist, although I don't do evangelism in the traditional sense. Even in my church I very seldom have an altar call or that kind of thing. I trust the truth and evangelists simply tell the truth. Evangelism is more than telling people the steps of how to be saved. Evangelism is connecting with people's longings. We all have these wild longings that each of us carries around with us, most of us just don't know it. But we know it when we're watching a football game and on comes an AT&T commercial and the next thing you know we're crying. Why are we crying? Even AT&T knows why. Because they just spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to connect with our longings. They know that people long for a family, that they long for that mom and dad that we've totally lost touch with, they long for mom and dad to be so very glad to see me, and to weep when I call on the phone.

Mars Hill: AT&T conjures up images of the prodigal son and all the longings that go with that image.

MY: Exactly, and AT&T knows more about those images than the church does. Now the church needs to find the words to connect in the same way.

Mars Hill: How do we do that? Where do we begin?

MY: This journal is a reflection of that need. When a culture is so lost and so godless, which is what ours is, then it becomes dead. As A.W. Tozer said, "This culture puts out the light in men and women's souls." So when the light goes out, when the wonder has disappeared, the rocks cry out. Jesus said that if we didn't

cry out then the rocks would cry out. That's why your publication is here. You couldn't stand it anymore; somebody had to come along and do this. And it's happening all across this country. It's happening with Harold Fickett, it's happening with Annie Dillard, it's happening with artists who are starting to get the courage and the permission to start speaking up and start conveying their message. You can't stop it.

Mars Hill: Bruce Cockburn has written the lyric: "From the lying mirror to the movement of stars, everybody's looking for who they are. Those who know don't have the words to tell. And the ones with the words don't know too well." Why do you suspect we are at such a loss for words when we have such a powerful message, when we know the truth?

MY: Evangelicals do not love the truth. We say we love the truth, but we are liars--we don't believe it. If we believed it then we would trust it, and we would allow it in all its outrageousness, in all of its craziness and haphazardness, to sort of explode. Instead, we try to control it, manipulate it, and to make it into a set of lifeless and dead principles. If we believed the truth we would allow it to explode in pockets of oddness all over this country.

Mars Hill: What do you mean by pockets of oddness?

MY: Somebody put it this way, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd." Truth has an oddness to it. We think we're going to like the truth but we're not going to like it. We're going to kill it, we're going to destroy it and we're going to put it on a cross. Jesus kept making people uncomfortable because truth is discomfoting. We don't want to hear it and yet we're attracted to it.

Mars Hill: It seems that as Christians we tend to think of non-Christians as the ones who don't want to hear the truth, but so often we find ourselves caught up in the very same issues, wrestling with truth. Wouldn't you say the gospel is just as relevant to me and you as Christians as it is to a non-Christian?

MY: Absolutely. What does it mean when a culture is pagan? It means that every thought, every word, every thing that happens within that culture is tainted by the belief that God does not exist. The sin of Sodom and Gomorra was not sodomy; it was the fact that people no longer thought it was a sin. Our thinking is so tainted by our culture that we don't even know that our own definition of reality is in itself pagan. So the mega-church comes along and we're all saying, "Isn't this wonderful!" No, it's not wonderful. It's a sociological phenomenon and it has nothing to do with the gospel. People say, "You mean God doesn't work in Bill Hybels' church?" Of course He does. But to assume that this phenomenon has any connection with God because it's big is nonsense. *Promise Keepers* is another sociological phenomenon. It has thousands of people who are jumping on the bandwagon. But this sort of affirmation that we're getting because we have all these huge crowds is frightening and in my opinion dangerous.

Mars Hill: Tell me about your experience at Bob Jones University.

MY: I went to Bob Jones for one year and was asked not to come back. I had graduated from high school when I was only sixteen and a couple of my friends were going there. It just seemed like that's where God wanted me to go. Maybe He did, maybe that's where God wanted me to go to be affirmed in my oddness. I will say that I'm grateful that Bob Jones gave me a lifelong appreciation of the Bible. I have never abandoned my utter belief that the Bible is our source of truth, so that was a good thing, but all the other stuff was just ridiculous.

Mars Hill: It seems a rather long and curious road to go from Bob Jones to Henri Nouwen. You're known for a contemplative, mystic faith where your vocabulary includes words like mystery, brokenness, failure, and desperation. How did you get on that road?

MY: Some lessons you can't learn until you're fifty. Life has its lessons to teach us and there are certain lessons that I can't get in six weeks or six months. For example, now the evangelicals have discovered spiritual direction and spiritual directors. Now you can go to a school and get a degree in it. You don't get to be a spiritual director by taking a class. You live fifty years, at least fifty years, and you let life batter you around a little bit. Then you have something to say. For me it took fifty years to suddenly discover that I didn't believe that God loved me. I was frenzied. The only way I knew that God loved me was by continually doing things. I had to finally come to the end of that dreary road. I had to finally exhaust myself to the point that I realized I couldn't do enough and that the more I did, the more I had to do. I realized that Jesus had been running after me, continually trying to get my attention, whispering in my ear, "Mike, I love you. I'll always love you...would you just let me love you?" It took me fifty years to learn that. I also had to develop the courage to realize that mystics don't look like mystics. If I were to ask you to write down a definition of what it means to be a spiritual person, I will guarantee you that whatever you write down for me will exclude you. Whatever those characteristics are you wouldn't have them all. It would be the height of arrogance to write down things that make a spiritual person and then say, "Whatta ya know...that's me." Sadly, that's the legacy that evangelicalism leaves with us. That everything is evaluated on the basis of some sort of formula. That if you don't have all the little things in the formula, then you don't make it. We measure everything and we need to be liberated from that measuring. I guarantee you that if you were to travel around with me everyday you would say, "You're not a mystic." For example, I read Teresa of Avila and when I'm done I go, "Huh?"

When I got to be fifty I read this book called "When the Heart Waits" by Sue Monk Kidd. Other than Henri Nouwen's "In the Name of Jesus", it is the most pivotal book in my life--it's brilliantly written. I turned to the bibliograph and with my highlighter marked all the books she kept referring to. Then I went out and

bought them all until I had this huge stack of books. There were authors like Saint John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Thomas Merton, and all these others. The funny thing is that I read these and I have no idea what they are talking about. My wife does though. I walk into the room, she's reading Teresa of Avila, and tears are coming down her face. She'll say, "read this." And I'll read it and it'll say, "The God within us who is the God without us, who is the God that we know, but don't know, and should know..." Suddenly, I'm crying because I have no idea what she's talking about.

Spirituality is so colorful and has such deep texture. Brennan Manning is one of the guys who has helped me so much with this. I was telling him I don't pray four hours a day. He said, "Mike, you think about God all day long." I realized that was true. He finally said, "Then shut up. You will never be one of these guys who runs around and says a great litany of prayers."

I don't really know how I ended up on this road. I guess it had to do with getting divorced. Divorce was one of the most... humiliating... experiences that I've ever had in my life. The arrogance that I had lived with all of my life, the rebelliousness and cockiness, was absolutely destroyed because divorce is such a public sin, and I did it. It's one of those sins that I deliberately did. I initiated the divorce, and I got it, so I can't play the victim. If you're the person being divorced you can say, "I tried, I did everything I could," and everybody has immediate sympathy. With me, I was the guy doing it. I don't need to go into it all, but it was very humiliating. The thing that has been so shocking though is that after I remarried I started hearing from my new wife the same things that I used to hear from my ex-wife. I started to realize that I was the problem. There were a lot of problems I was able to blame on someone else and never have to deal with. After the divorce I really thought I was washed up, that I was history. These were the seeds that were planted so that when I turned fifty and went to L'Arche, they suddenly made sense to me. I had heard people talk all the time about embracing your brokenness, but I didn't know what the hell they were talking about. But that's because I never thought I was broken. But when I got divorced I was broken and I knew I was broken like I never was.

Mars Hill: We become full of God when we are empty, powerful when we are broken, and know grace when we fail miserably. Strange, isn't it?

MY: Not too long ago I went to a men's retreat. These guys started opening up and by the time it came my turn I couldn't even get the words out of my mouth because I was so moved. Eventually, these two words popped out of my mouth: lost and lonely. I felt lost and lonely. One of the greatest experiences that I've had in the last year was the realization that the ministry is so lonely. I never realized that it is in the loneliness where I hear God say to me, "Well done, you're doing what you need to do, and part of what you do is you get to be lonely all your life." Part of the call of leadership and being in a ministry is a kind of loneliness that I don't think anybody can really understand.

The only way I can explain it is when people say to me, "Mike, you're so open in the pulpit, but once you get down from the pulpit or get off the tape you become distant and it's hard to get close to you." There's no question that they are right. I feel sort of like Janis Joplin who said that as she entertained from on stage she could make love to twenty-five thousand people, but then still go home feeling lonely. After a sermon I don't want to see you, I don't want to talk to you, or go back over the material. I just opened up my gut to you and I can't talk about it.

You're just going to have to live with the loose ends. But I honestly believe that this is what makes great preaching and great writing, bringing issues to the surface, naming things for people. Naming is part of what good writers and good preachers do. We suddenly say, "Here it is, here's what you're feeling, here's what you're struggling with, here's what's really going on." For example, I gave a sermon yesterday on authority. In this culture if you are not an expert and if you don't have a bunch of letters after your name, and if you are not an expert in your particular field, then you're a nobody. So we have a church full of nothings who sit around and focus upon the personality up front or in the pulpit. It's time that we reclaimed the authority of the everyday ordinary person and that these folks, because of their relationship with Jesus, have this incredible power and authority. So I name that with this congregation who has been beat up all week by life. Many of whom are people who have never graduated from high school or are alcoholics who have been rejected by everybody. Then to say to them, "You know, it's not just that God forgives you, it's that He gives you a power so that you can make a difference with your life. That's what Jesus does for you." So there's a kind of haunting loneliness that goes with leadership. I can point to numerous people that everybody reading this would know immediately but when you get them alone, they don't want to be around you, they are sick and tired of you. Yes, some speak too much, and there's ego involved, but some folk's great gift is to get up in front of a group, or write down on paper something you never knew or thought of, although personally they are just really duds to be around. I just got back from speaking this past week. The people who picked me up at the airport had never heard of me or met me. I was just grumpy and didn't really want to talk. When I got there I found out we were going to go in a van with fifteen kids. Now I've been doing youth ministry 34 years and I'm tired of kids. I'm done sleeping in sleeping bags. The thought of two and a half hours in a van with fifteen kids was unbelievable, so I rented a car. I'm sure you can imagine what they thought: "Who is this guy? He's arrogant and cocky...he's so grumpy and uptight!" Later I got up and spoke. Afterwards I walked back to where I was staying and the guy who had come by to pick me up says, "What are you, Sybil? I don't even know who that person was who just spoke up there." Well, let me tell you, it was me! That was the same guy who was being grumpy and withdrawn and neurotic.

Mars Hill: How do you handle it then when people resent you for being who you are, warts and all?

MY: A lot of it you can improve on. You can always be nicer and more gracious. I can always be better at that. The other thing is that I acknowledge that this is who I am. It's part of my calling. It's the shadow side of the side you like. Unfortunately, that's what you get. It's what you get in marriage and in most meaningful relationships where you really know a person. After all, what are friendships? They are pockets of safety. I can sit down with my friend and say, "Thank God I'm out of there," and they're not going to be offended. They'll be saying, "I know what you mean."

Mars Hill: It seems as if the people sitting in the pews, or listening to your tape want to have that same level of relationship with you as your wife, or close friend, and then they resent you when that is not available.

MY: You're absolutely right, you just pegged it. You named that for me. The nature of the relationship just isn't the same. I have three or four good friends in my life, some of whom are twenty-five hundred miles away. One of them put it this way. He said, "My job in life is to have six pall bearers by the time I die." He wants to have six really good friendships; he doesn't have them yet, but he's hoping to get them. I've got about four out of my six. They're people who I can call up at any time and start where we left off.

Mars Hill: What's your church like?

MY: You would be very disappointed if you came. It doesn't have a razzle-dazzle service with contemporary worship and praise music and it's not really cool. We cry nearly every Sunday in our church and we are not a charismatic church. The most amazing things happen. Why is that? What the heck is it about our church? I'm not quite sure, but one thing is that you're safe when you walk in the door. My view is that when a person walks in the door of a church they immediately sense something. What is it? What do they feel, sense, and smell? What is the atmosphere and the fragrance of the church? What is it that without even trying or knowing what they are doing, that they immediately sense the moment they walk in? Everybody in our church walks in the door and they're thinking, "How can I be judgmental to you, how can I act like it's a surprise to see you? It's a surprise that I'm there!" One guy who used to be a Hell's Angel still won't use the word Jesus. When I asked him why he comes to our church he said, "Because you don't wear socks." Somehow, I think I missed that in seminary! But because I didn't wear socks there was something about that which made him free to come, even though right now he only believes in a "higher power."

Then there's this girl in our church named Maria who I just love. Nearly every sermon she raises her hand and says, "Now what are you talking about?" I finished a sermon about three weeks ago and Maria, who is 16 years old and very bright, suddenly raises her hand and asks, "Can I pray for you?" I say, "Sure, of course." She asks, "Can I come up front?" So she walks up front while

the service is still going on. She prayed, "Lord thanks for Mike. We all know that if he weren't in this church we'd all be lost, including him. Amen." What a gift! Our church is a church which needs to be in Yreka. I need it because it keeps my feet on the ground. They are unimpressed. A year ago I came back from England where I was speaking at *The Greenbelt Festival* with three thousand people at a seminar. People were wanting to see me and meet with me, the BBC interviewed me, it was a big deal. When I came back to the church, Mrs. MacIntosh who is 80 years old said, "Don't you miss three Sundays in a row again!" I said, "It's my vacation... I'm not even paid by the church... I'm a volunteer." She said, "That's not the point. You said you were called to this church, did you not? Then live up to your calling!" Only an 80 year old can get away with that, but I needed to hear it.

Mars Hill: Tell me about *The Greenbelt Festival* and your involvement with it over the last few years. What exactly is an ecumenical art festival?

MY: For one thing it's totally different from anything you've seen over here in the United States. Cornerstone is as close as you can come, but even that is not even close. Greenbelt is a genuine arts festival because it's not speaker centered; they don't have speakers on the main stage. They have bands playing all over, but while the bands are playing they have seminars going on. There's twenty-five thousand people there. And they have ballet, sculpture, art, fashion design, hair styling, and the symphony. They have a rendition of the Messiah in this 15th century cathedral that happens to be on the grounds of this castle. They have the Messiah as one of the options to attend on a Sunday afternoon. When you get to the door of the castle they hand you the music and you discover that you are part of the Messiah in this cathedral filled with 500 people, all singing together. It was one of the great moments of my life. And *Greenbelt* has a worship service on Sunday morning that I'll never forget. It was twenty-five thousand people including every race, and age, and color. There were punkers, rockers, you name it. It was the most unbelievable experience I've ever had in my life. *The Greenbelt Festival* is the granddaddy of all the festivals because they have not lost their cutting edge. They've made their share of mistakes, but that's the thing that bothers me about the ones in the United States, they don't make mistakes. For example, at *Greenbelt* they had a homosexual art exhibit one year with all these penises displayed. They obviously made a mistake.

Mars Hill: Do they put the conference on with the idea of encouraging and developing the arts?

MY: For one thing, they are Christians who are putting on a festival; they are not putting on a Christian festival. So they want the best art, the best music, the best sculpture. It has a Christian element to it, but it's not a Christian festival. For example, they have these hothouses where you can debate all these different subjects. They may have a witch there, or the most diverse range of subjects where you can participate in question-and-answer sessions. They encourage

thinking and discussion over the major issues of the day. They will bring in groups that are not Christians, but who have great music. They'll bring in experimental worship and encourage that. Talk about radical youth ministry, the United States is asleep compared to what they are doing over there. It's a non-stop, overwhelming, four day event that everybody ought to attend.

Mars Hill: Tell me about one of your most memorable interviews in *The Door*.

MY: If you're lucky you get six or seven wonder producing experiences in your life that you never forget. And this is one of the seven greatest experiences in my life. We have a friend at *The Door* that we previously interviewed who is an atheist. He wrote a new book so we went back to re-interview him. We wanted to see where he was and whether he was still an atheist. He still calls himself an atheist but says, "I want faith in the worst way, I just can't have it." So, first of all, he blew away all my categories because I thought atheists wanted to be atheists. I thought that they were enemies of the church who deliberately and intentionally hated faith and God and wanted nothing to do with Him. Well, there are people like that, but that's not all of them. He desperately wants faith and he believes it's a gift that he just hasn't been given. He wanted to take us to the art museum, which is near the university where he used to teach. We came off the elevator and there in front of us is a carved Christ. He whispered to us with wide eyes, "Look at this thing. Let me describe it to you and explain where it came from. It came from the fourteenth century and was carved out of an elephant tusk." He started going into all this detail and by the time we were done it was as if we were in a holy place. When he was done he said, "Now come here." We walked around the corner and there was this carved Pieta which was honestly very ugly. Jesus was across the lap of the mother and he was in a very odd position like he had been broken. It literally looked like he had been broken in two. He whispers again, "Look at that, look at how this body looks broken... it looks as though Jesus fell from a very great height." And then he paused, looked at us, and said with a smile, "Of course He did, didn't He? He fell from the greatest height imaginable." Now I'm telling you, if he's not a Christian then I'm not a Christian. I had the reluctant priest telling me about Jesus. He created a cathedral in a museum. Believe me, this man knows Jesus; his intellect just hasn't caught up with his heart yet. But do you explain that? If you try to explain that you'll end up ruining it.

Mars Hill: As an "atheist" he personally knows more about the incarnation than I do, but the words and the categories just don't seem to fit.

MY: I just think we need to find new words for what the Christian faith does. It seems to me that there are better words. And that's why I love *The Message* because Eugene Peterson has tried to come up with words that have some life. I was reading something he translated in Matthew 10 where people say to Jesus, "Dung face" and as I read it I just said, "Yes! This is my kind of Bible." And I have a feeling that in the first draft it wasn't "dung face."

Mars Hill: Why do you suppose that Peterson has gotten a fair amount of negative criticism from certain groups for *The Message*?

MY: Because words are powerful and people are scared to death of words. Words should be life giving, opening doors and giving me insights into faith that I never quite saw before. Words have great power, but they have become so cheap and so meaningless. Part of the role of the church in the 1990's is to come up with new words to define the gospel because the old words don't work anymore. This culture has so deadened our emotions, our faith, our passion, and our ability to understand reality, that I've got to find a way to get people's attention. Some words force me to rethink what I think I believe about the gospel. They cause me to stop for a minute and say, "Now what did you say and what did you mean by that?" We need to talk about the gospel in new ways.

At the men's conference that I mentioned earlier I had to do a study with the men. I used five words to evaluate where each of us was. They were words that I keep being pulled and attracted to. The first word was **wonder**. Since I went to L'Arche two years ago I feel like a kid in a candy store. Every time I run into a Christian brother we're both going, "Did you know this," or "Did you see that?" It's opening everything up instead of just shriveling up and giving up on my faith. The next word was **glimpse**. I'm convinced that if we're lucky, we get a glimpse of God maybe four or five times in our life. But it's enough, which allows me to say, "I can't see God right now, but I saw just a glimpse of Him about a year ago and I believe this is all true." The third word is **terror**. The mystics always talk about terror and I've never understood it, although I do now. It's the recognition of what truth means. Truth is frightening, terrifying. I'm not sure I really want to be with the truth which is why we work so hard to control it, suppress it, and take the life out of it. When the guys were in the boat when Jesus calmed the storm, I'm convinced that they were more afraid when the storm was over. They knew the terror of near death in a storm, but now they knew a new terror. The terror of a God who can calm a storm. And I don't think there are enough terrified people in the church. The church is made up of people who have God all figured out. After terror, **mystery** was another of my words. Growing up in the evangelical church, nobody talks about mystery. They don't know anything about mystery. Their role is to solve and get rid of the mystery. They think that's helping us know God. But I was robbed of the glory of mystery.

Mars Hill: How do we come up with new words and begin to talk about the gospel in new ways?

MY: We are too familiar with the Bible. Frederick Buechner said that once Scripture becomes familiar it loses its power over us. So, in a practical sense, one of the ways you develop new words is to read the Bible with new words, read a different version. Try to see it in a new way, try to come to it as a stranger for the first time. Try to look for ways that people have made the Bible come alive

again. Read a lot. To be frank with you, one of the greatest things that has happened to me is reading. I'm building a study in my house now that all but two of the kids are moved out. I want to make one of our bedrooms a room that surrounds me with books. And the ones I always refer to I want to be right behind me so that I can always just look to see if they are there. These books have become my friends. Reading has become for me such a wild and wonderful adventure that I missed out on for so much of my life.

Mars Hill: How should the church proceed into the 21st century to reach out to a post-Christian society?

MY: This is one of those things that the church doesn't want to hear. I'll talk about two things: first the church as an institution, and second the church as people like you and me. First, the church is incapable of changing much because it's so tied in to economic dependency. It's just not going to happen. I'm 52 so I'm too old, but I do these youth conferences and tell these young guys, "We need to be radical." Now I'm only going to rearrange the furniture because I've got my kid's college to think about. But if they really took me seriously, then *Youth Specialties* would be out of business in a year. So I know that as I say this it will hurt me, but I still have to say it. I see these young people saying, "Yeah, I hear you, that's really true." But they aren't going to do anything. They are already tied to a paycheck, sucked into having to support their family or whatever. In the sixties though nobody gave a damn. We said, "Hey screw it, we're going to go out and be radical for God." We were anti-institution, but now we are an institution. The young church that came up out of the sixties is all part of the establishment now if I can use an old word. Any revolution in the church is going to come from people who don't give a damn about their paycheck. They aren't angry enough yet because they haven't been done in enough yet. I don't think the church is capable of changing much because it's too involved with big business. For example, *Focus on the Family* is a huge business and they don't like being told "no." In fact nobody tells them "no" for fear that this big political institution will come down on them. It's wrong and somebody ought to blow the whistle on them. It's not personal either. James Dobson is a wonderful guy and he'll be in heaven with the rest of us. But this organization is out of control and it's not the only one. Again, no normal thinking is going on where we ask, "Is this right or is this wrong?" Within seconds anything that comes along is immediately made into a money making enterprise.

Mars Hill: What about the church on the individual level?

MY: On the individual level, you and I, and publications like *The Door* and *The Mars Hill Review* are basically telling people that they are not crazy. See, you and I live life and suddenly we get a thought and think, "That was kind of bizarre." Or, "That seems to be dishonest." And everybody around us says, "Oh come on, get out of here." We then say, "Okay, I guess I was wrong." Every once in a while every single one of us has a glimpse of truth and we know it's true. Everybody

around us says it's not true. It's like going to a Bill Gothard seminar and sitting there along with ten thousand people and thinking, "Am I nuts?," while everyone in that room is saying, "You are nuts." Part of the way we save a good number of people who are ready to dump their faith and jump ship is to come along and say, "You are not crazy." I remember driving somewhere with this nice little couple and they talked about how their church was growing. Their church was meeting in a high school and everything was going great. They shared with me that they thought their minister wanted to build a new church and they didn't think it was a good idea. They thought since everybody else said they wanted to build a church they should too. I screamed, "NO!"

Will Willimon is a guy who says we are not teaching college aged young people resistance and that one of the great things we can teach young people and each one of us in the church is to say, "No, I don't think so, we're not going to do that, we're going to stop you."

Every once in a while you just kind of hope that as we model telling people they're not crazy, a few more join in, and then there's a bunch of you. It's the old principal that's still true and still operating. It's the idea that the minority led by the Holy Spirit can be a salt and a light in the world and can still make a difference.