



## **A Conversation with Philip Yancey**

Michael Cusick probes the heart of one of Christendom's best thinkers

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Premier Issue: pgs 89-102.

Philip Yancey is editor-at-large for *Christianity Today* and is a best-selling author whose books include, *Disappointment With God*, *Where Is God When It Hurts*, and *I Was Just Wondering*. As a freelance writer, he has had more than 600 of his articles appear in over 80 different publications, including *Reader's Digest* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Philip and his wife live in Evergreen, Colorado.

**Mars Hill:** Philip, you grew up in a fundamentalist family in the Bible belt, an environment which you described as having "vaccinated you against spiritual truth." What does this mean?

**PY:** Well, a vaccination is when you get a small dose of something that is very similar to a real disease organism. The smallpox vaccination started out with cowpox, but it was close enough to smallpox so that if you got a cowpox vaccination you wouldn't get smallpox. When smallpox came around, then your body automatically rejected it because it recognized cowpox as an enemy and found ways to cope with it. I think that's what happened to me growing up. The words of the Bible were used but they were misused. People talk about child abuse; there is also a kind of biblical church abuse. People would say, "God is love," but it sounded a lot like hate. I grew up in a very racist environment where there were people in the Ku Klux Klan in our church. They would say the word grace but they would mean law - it was all rules. What happened over time is that the biblical words were force fed into me, enough to make me allergic to them so that when I came upon them later, my first reaction was to get away from them. I wanted to get away because I had seen so much falsehood in the religion that interpreted those words for me.

**Mars Hill:** Though you grew up among all the trappings of fundamentalism, the decisive factors in your spiritual awakening were classical music and nature. In the midst of being force fed truth what did they stir in you?

**PY:** A friend of mine in California has been through a lot of counseling programs. At first he followed Freud, then he followed Jung, then Adler, and then Behaviorism. He told me, "I'm so confused because they all contradict each other." There were two things that they had in common, though, and he said that when you are a child, before you are three years old, you will learn these two things: "Is the world good?", and "Am I loved?" Those are the two great questions that you learn. I learned that the world is not good and that I was not loved. How do you overcome that? It's a heavy burden to overcome. (I think that's why family is so important and why God invests so much in it - we can perform that service for our kids).

Nature and classical music were the first chinks in the armor that made me aware that maybe the world was, if not good, maybe a little better than I thought. I was at a Bible college where I was viewed as a deviant. People would pray for me and try to cast out demons and all that kind of thing. I was trying to survive in that environment while they were trying to force this religion on me that I had developed antigens to. They would lock the doors to the dorms at around ten-thirty at night and fortunately I was on the first floor. I would climb out the window of my room and go through a window in the chapel where they had a nine foot Steinway grand piano. There was complete darkness except the little light by which to read music. For an hour or so each night I would sit in the dark and play Beethoven Sonatas, Chopin Preludes, and Schubert Impromptus. It was a way of restoring a kind of tactile order to a very confused world. My mind was confused, my body was confused, the world was confused. But here was beauty, beauty that I was touching and even creating. The same thing happened with nature as I began to become more attuned to beauty. If I needed to get away from the ideas and the people and all of that, I would take long walks in the pine forests of South Carolina. I would come across birds, butterflies and insects, and other reminders that there is great goodness in this world. It wasn't a goodness I had previously experienced in family and it wasn't a goodness I previously had experienced in church. Eventually, I became open to the idea that if there is such a thing as goodness - C.S. Lewis uses the phrase, "drippings of grace", and I caught some of those drippings - then there must be an author or a source.

About the same time I fell in love, head over heels in love, even though I didn't believe in romantic love. I could demonstrate to you that it was an invention in the 14<sup>th</sup> century by a bunch of poets in Italy. But that was before I experienced love. When I did experience it I realized what it was like to have someone communicate everything that was right with me instead of everything that was wrong with me. It goes back to those early messages you get before you are three-years-old. "Are you okay?" No, I was not okay. Now I was learning that I was okay and that I was loved. Those were the cracks that God used to reach me. Because the normal means God uses had all been spoiled for me: the words, the testimonies, the prayers had all been spoiled. I knew how to use those and how to abuse those and they didn't reach me. I was inoculated against them. I was not prepared for a good world, I was not prepared for beauty; it caught me

off guard.

**Mars Hill:** That's an intriguing phrase you used, that you were "not prepared for beauty." It was beauty that finally captivated you. Related to that idea you've written, "Without nature and art, I could hardly relate to awe and glory and joy. With them I can better respond to such concepts as estrangement, redemption, and finally resurrection." Will you speak as to how these elements of beauty have affected your relationships with God and others since growing up in such a negative environment?

**PY:** C.S. Lewis used a phrase about nature that we don't go to nature to find our theology, but that we take our theology to nature and it fills those words with meaning. I think that's very true. I remember the first time I read *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* by Annie Dillard. If you go to nature and you look for theology you are going to come away with a very mixed bag. There are wonderful sunsets, and wonderful butterflies, and half a billion species of beetles. But there are also mosquitoes, and mountain lions, and scorpions, and deserts. So what do you do? The biblical teaching that I understand is that nature is fallen just as we are fallen. Nature isn't our mother, it's a fallen sister of ours. I learned those kinds of words, like awe and glory but I didn't even know what they meant. How could I experience them? Well, once I know the words it's very hard to experience those words directly about God because God is invisible, God's a spirit, and you don't always know whether you're connecting with Him or not. But you can take those words to nature and you can experience something of glory. Driving through the mountain canyon to come to this interview there was snow on the rocks on the side of the hills, the green buds were coated with snow, and the river roared from the spring melt - these are pictures of glory.

It's funny, I open theology books and find all these words about God's omnipotence, God's omniscience, God's impassibility, and all these kinds of things, but what strikes me first before any of those things is God's brilliance and God's creativity. We are surrounded by it.

God clearly loves matter and He clearly had a good time arranging matter. There are laws that our best physicists and best chemists are still baffled by today, astonished by. This is the world we live in, it's a world that gives us pictures of what God is like. Later, after that, I found that human beings as well give us pictures, both good and bad, of spiritual reality. We are material beings, beings of matter. And more than that, God became a being in matter, he became a human being. I think Christianity made a turn in a bad direction pretty early on following Greek Platonist thought when it divorced itself from the world: bodies became bad and the world something we should escape from. I think a much healthier perspective is to go back to the Psalms, and other parts of the Old Testament, to see the world as a carrier of grace and a carrier of God. So many of these things are hard when we try to relate to an invisible God. It's much easier to learn through story, through the natural world around us, through beauty.

**Mars Hill:** It seems there's a tension then with presenting truth powerfully and presenting it in such a way as to not vaccinate against it. How do we raise our kids, how do we lead congregations, how do we give sermons without doing just that?

**PY:** Well, we do so with humility and with honesty. I think these are two things that the church has not done very well, has not gotten down. I was teaching a class on Jesus in my church in Chicago. After we had been at it for four or five weeks it suddenly occurred to me that there was a clear pattern. The more immoral a person was, the more comfortable they felt with Jesus. The more moral a person was, the less comfortable they were with Jesus. You can take a Harmony of the Gospels and read the first encounters with him. One was a very immoral woman, one was a woman who had seven devils cast out of her, then came tax collectors like Matthew and Zaccheus. The known sinners, these were the people who invited Jesus over for parties. They clearly liked being around Jesus. And they didn't go to him out of a sense of ought to, they clearly wanted to. The people you would expect to like Jesus, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, were always on the edge of the crowd judging him, very alienated and distant from him. I asked this class, "Is the church like this now?" Of course, the answer was, "No", the church isn't like this at all.

A friend of mine who worked with the homeless in Chicago told me one of the saddest stories I've ever heard. A woman he worked with had a cocaine habit. She was so desperate that she would rent out her two year old daughter to men so they could have sex with her. The woman would get one hundred dollars per man which would be just enough for another fix. She was homeless, she had bad health, she had no one to care for her. She poured out her story to my friend who is a Christian minister and he was overwhelmed and amazed. At the end he said to her, "As you went through all this, did you ever think about going to a church for help?" He said that he would never forget the look of absolute naive shock that crossed her face as she said, "Church! Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling bad enough, they would just make me feel worse!"

**Mars Hill:** What an indictment against us!

**PY:** Right, it is an indictment, and there's a lot of truth there. Why would a divorced person go to church when they're just going to feel worse? Why would a criminal who has served time in jail go to church? Why would a prostitute go to church? They did go to Jesus though. All of those people went to Jesus. I think the church has missed the boat, to the degree that we get away from Jesus' message of grace and loving people. Not loving deeds, but people. In the American church grace gets all mixed in with a strand of perfectionism that came out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century revival movements. We try to be good, everybody needs to look like they have it all together. To the degree that we do that we make it hard for kids or congregations to see what God is like. We inoculate them

against it. Jesus starts with, "You are accepted." Remember the publican who had done nothing right except pray, "Lord have mercy on me." And the Pharisee who did everything right except pray, "Lord have mercy on me;" he prayed, "I'm so much better than that publican."

Basically, the church has gotten into the business of being like a moral extermination force. You have these exterminators that go in and kill all the insects in your house by spraying chemicals on them - that's the way the church perceives itself. "Well we live in this society of dirty bugs so we have to spray them so they all die." It changes all the time. Right now the hot dirty bugs are abortion and homosexuality. These are important issues, but interestingly enough Jesus never mentioned either one of them even though he was here for 33 years. They are very important issues but the primary mission of the church is not to go around spraying dirty bugs. The primary mission of the church is to express the love of God and his deep desire for reconciliation with people who have rejected Him.

**Mars Hill:** It seems that God assumes the fact that we are sinful and calls us to get on with the business of loving others. We make sin the point when God takes it for granted and says, "I am the point." Should we in the body of Christ be more concerned with the beauty that is in the character of Christ and the manifestations of that beauty in things like classical music and nature and art as we present the gospel?

**PY:** I had a discussion with a Christian who teaches philosophy at a secular college in Virginia. He said that they would go back and read Greek philosophy, starting with Aristotle and Plato. Then, everyone agreed on the three verities: truth, goodness, beauty. He said that in today's environment he could get nowhere trying to express truth. There is no absolute truth for these kids, they don't believe there is one, it's a hopeless search and they would just laugh at you if you held that up. Next is goodness. Where do you get morality? Unless you believe and accept a revelation like the Bible, the Koran or whatever, you have no basis for morality. Everybody does what is right in his own mind. That's exactly where these kids are. He said, "I've got no foothold in either one of these places to put my foot and stand firm, but in the realm of beauty they are open." They are aware of beauty. For some it's classical music and nature, for some it's the female form or who knows what. They all have their own definitions of beauty, but they all still have a pure ideal of beauty built into them. They don't have a pure ideal of truth, they don't have a pure ideal of goodness, but they do have a pure ideal of beauty. I think that this is a very significant starting point. If the church on "Mars Hill" is trying to reach modern people, I think we're wise to start where the cracks and openings are.

**Mars Hill:** So what would be the implications of using these cracks in training Christian leaders? In seminary or Christian ministry programs should we teach courses in art and literature such as Dostoevsky and Flannery O'Connor? Would

that be an important part in training a minister of the gospel?

**PY:** Interestingly, one of the first things a seeker church like *Willow Creek* in Chicago does, is to institute drama. At first they were these crummy skits borrowed from *Young Life* and *Youth for Christ*, but now they have full-time professional writers who are cranking out dog-gone well written drama. The playwright, Arthur Miller, said that when he wrote a play, unless he could see somebody in the audience, in their eyes and in their facial expression saying, "My God, that's me!," then he knew he had failed. If he would see that reaction, then he knew he had succeeded. Isn't that true of church as well? Unless we can communicate, "My God, that's me!," then we've failed to present the message. Jesus did the same thing in person, and he did it in a very dramatic way.

**Mars Hill:** And two thousand years later why are more people drawn to going to the theater to see movies than to going to church? Why are people more touched by *Schindler's List* or some other film than by preaching on Sunday morning?

**PY:** That hasn't always been true. You can look at the greatest novels in history and the greatest poetry in history and it's written by Christians.

**Mars Hill:** Writers such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and T. S. Eliot?

**PY::** Yes, and John Donne, George Herbert - this was the best and it's still the best. You can get a Ph.D. in English anywhere you want and you will come back to those people. So it certainly hasn't always been true, but today most people aren't reading any of those either.

**Mars Hill:** Are you familiar with Geoffrey Hill who wrote *Illuminating Shadows*? The thesis of his book is that secular worshippers go to the temple of the cinema, to the theaters, to hear a good story whereas in the times of the Old Testament people used to go to the religious temple to hear a good story. People go to hear a story at the theater for the same transcendent purposes as say, listening to classical music, though the message may not be explicitly redemptive. Do you have any comment on that idea?

**PY:** It sounds good to me! I've not heard of him or that idea before but it sounds good. It's interesting, when I give courses in writing people say, "What makes good writing?" My answer to that is, "What makes a human being?" What makes a human being is the progression of time; "A" happens, then "B" happens, then "C" happens, which is of course the nature of every story – "once upon a time," "and then," "and then," "and then," "and then." A story conveys the feeling that we are trapped in time. God presumably is timeless; we are not. We don't know what is going to happen around the corner and this sets up a tension. We want to know what happened, who's going to commit the murder and is she or is she not going to marry him. In addition, we are material creatures; we smell, feel, taste, and see. Good writing and good art of all kinds capitalizes on these two facts. It

capitalizes on our time-boundness so that you have suspense and intrigue, and it also capitalizes on our sensual nature. All good writing is image bearing - words that evoke the senses. And yet, so often - not always, but often - in church, we disembodied. We talk about, "the spiritual aspect" and we trade away one of the main advantages we have. But that wasn't Jewish. The Jews were both time oriented and sensually oriented.

I look at the Bibles that people carry to evangelical churches and they have one little dirty part which is where their thumb always is. It's the epistles, the letters, which are the most abstract and the most conceptual, though they constitute only about ten percent of the Bible. Actually, there is a lot of emotion, a lot of pathos, a lot of metaphor in those epistles, but compared to the rest of the Bible, they are far more conceptual. Why is it that we only read that ten percent? The gospels are all story, the Psalms are all poetry, as is most of the wisdom literature. Most of the Old Testament is history, but we find one little doctrinal part. I think we don't connect well with the person in the pew. They don't sit there and say, "My God, that's me!" because that ten percent is only a part of them. It's the conceptual thinking part which most people don't do very often.

**Mars Hill:** So in your mind, does it come back to speaking to people in poetry and story so as not to vaccinate against spiritual truth?

**PY:** Yes, but I want to go beyond that. I guess I would say humanity more than story. I read these narrative theologians, Stanley Hauerwas and others, and half the time I don't even know what they are talking about when they say "story." It sounds like a new God, "Story, Story, Story!" Story is basically a description of reality, that's all it is.

**Mars Hill:** So my life is a story and your life is a story?

**PY:** Yes. And you could say, "honesty" instead of a description of reality. Or, "This is the way life really is." If we express that, it doesn't necessarily need to be within the frame of a story which is a time dimensional thing. Yet story is a very powerful medium - how does the Bible start? "Once upon a time," "In the beginning." We are creatures of time.

**Mars Hill:** In one of your most recent books, *Discovering God*, which is subtitled, "A Devotional Journey Through the Bible," you set out to convey a sense of what the whole Bible was about after having listened to many people talk of their discouragement over Bible reading and daily devotions. What is the importance of knowing the larger context, or the larger story of the scriptures, as opposed to taking your thumb and keeping it on the epistles?

**PY:** Let's look at it another way. Let's ask, "How could we possibly make sense out of life if we didn't have Genesis as the first book and Revelation as the last

book, unless we had the whole story, the broad scope?" I think the Bible gives us the cosmic view.

**Mars Hill:** In *Disappointment with God*, you wrote of discovering the cosmic view, or God's perspective, while being holed up in a cabin for two weeks and reading the whole Bible cover to cover. Is that what you mean?

**PY:** Yes, from Genesis what do we learn? We learn that the world we live in is a world that expresses the care and the brilliance and the love of God, the creator of all that is. He spent a lot of time creating, it was a major project. A lot of God is invested in this world. But, very quickly, two chapters later, this project - because of certain mechanisms God built into it by developing human freedom - did not turn out the way he originally designed. Skip to Revelation and you see the exact duplicate of Genesis one and two. You see a garden, you see trees, you see a river runs through it. The only change is that now there is a city. There is no city in Genesis one because there are only two people. The Bible begins and ends in the same place. If I didn't have Revelation, then I wouldn't have any answers to the problem of pain.

**Mars Hill:** There would be no future hope.

**PY:** Right, if I didn't have Revelation, then I would have a very different view of God than I do now. I would look at this world and I would say, "God is part good and part bad. He's a fairly good engineer, but he didn't get everything right." Because of Revelation I can say, "God is no more satisfied with this world than I am." And in fact, at great personal cost, the story of the Bible is what God is planning to do about this screwed up world. That is the story of the Bible, it's the story of recreation, and the depths to which God descends to accomplish recreation. So unless I have the whole story, my view of God, my view of myself, and my view of trying to find my way is all screwed up.

I use an analogy in *Where is God When it Hurts?*: What if there was a museum that exists containing only work of Picasso's Blue Period and I stumble across this museum. The door is open so I walk in, but what I don't know is that some vandals have broken in the night before and sprayed graffiti all over the paintings. So, I'm sitting there and I'm making judgments about what kind of an artist Picasso is. In the first place, I've only got a little bit of the evidence, the Blue Period, which is not typical Picasso. In the second place, even that small part has been stained, it's been marred, it's been ruined. Back to where we started, if you just look at nature, or human history, or frankly, if you just look at the church, you're judging God in the same way I would judge Picasso by the Blue Period with paint sprayed all over the work. God's no more happy about the world now than Picasso would have been about that museum.

**Mars Hill:** Why are so many Christians, myself included, often so discouraged by reading the Bible but drawn to, let's say, a John Grisham novel or other popular fiction?

**PY:** The Bible takes work. Everything takes work, or anything worthwhile takes work, and John Grisham doesn't take work. I started a project a couple of years ago of reading through all the plays of Shakespeare. I'm about two-thirds of the way through, though there are only thirty-five of them. Originally I intended to read one a week but we moved and I got a new schedule. Frankly, it's work to sit there and read Shakespeare. I keep thinking *Time* magazine would be a lot more entertaining, even *The New Yorker* would be easier to get into. However, at no time have I ever done it and regretted it. It is rewarding, it's worth the effort. I've got to pay attention, I've got to drink coffee to stay awake at night, I have to concentrate and look down at the footnotes for some of the words that have changed their meaning over time. The reason it's great though is because it stands up. Centuries later, it's still truth. All the time I'm saying, "My God, that's me!," as I read it. I find the same thing is true with the Bible: it does take work, it's not easy. I have often had a similar reaction in reading the Bible as I do to Shakespeare, but every time I go ahead and do it anyway, I'm rewarded. It's not the same kind of reward you would get by watching *Seinfeld* but it's a better reward.

**Mars Hill:** It seems like evangelicals come to the scriptures to find answers instead of coming to the stories of the text and discovering what questions God has chosen to answer. Your writings have emphasized asking hard questions. What is the importance of asking questions?

**PY:** That's very true. When I wrote *Disappointment with God* I thought it was a brand new idea and somewhat heretical that one could be disappointed with God. Then I started reading the Bible. There is a lot of disappointment with God in the Bible. About half of the Psalms are psalms of disappointment. We tend to think of them as psalms of comfort but many are angry, upset psalms – "God, where are you? Why aren't you answering my prayer?" The whole book of Jeremiah, the whole book of Lamentations, Habbakkuk, Job are books of questions. And people who came to Jesus with questions almost always went back with harder questions, not with answers.

**Mars Hill:** So the more questions we ask, the more questions we have?

**PY:** Right. And Jesus had this wonderful way of throwing it back, he'd never let you get off the hook. "Exactly what do I have to do to get eternal life?" He'd find the one thing you're not willing to do and throw it back at you. Somehow, I think we've really tamed the Bible.

**Mars Hill:** What do you mean that we've tamed the bible?

**PY:** Well, we've made it an answer book. You can buy these little books in bookstores that give one hundred promises from the Bible. You look these things up and one of them will say, "Not a sparrow falls to the ground without the Father knowing about it and caring about it." That makes me feel very good, however, if you go back to the passage in which that comes from it's a passage in which Jesus is giving these dire warnings. They are trembling in their boots as he's about to send them out on their first short term mission project. He's saying, "You're going to be pulled into synagogues! You're going to be flogged! You're going to be jailed! And some of you are going to be killed!" Then, in the middle of this fierce speech which has them trembling, he says, "But, not a sparrow will fall to the ground unless your Father knows it." God isn't surprised by calamity; it's part of the cost of what it means to follow him. We wrench the verse out of this context and we stick it in a little book on promises. If I read that book in the morning, and read just that verse without looking where it came from, and I find out my son has cancer, I blame God and I blame the Bible. But, it's not their fault.

**Mars Hill:** And there again, it seems that's part of what vaccinates, or hardens us against spiritual truth.

**PY:** Yes, exactly.

**Mars Hill:** So God gives us reassurance in the midst of our questioning, our confusion, our despair. Is the reassurance he gives us a future hope which we discover in the "cosmic view" of the scriptures?

**PY:** It's not just a future hope. I think the message of that particular verse is that God knows the cost, and that God cares. God cares about creation, and he especially cares about... "Blessed are you when you are persecuted and reviled for my sake, for yours is the kingdom of God." That is a more foundational truth, it is the foundational truth of the gospels, compared to if you follow the right formula, then your life will work out. You can come up with a lot more support for blessed are the persecuted. I think that's the message that Jesus is trying to express in that passage. Instead, we take it to mean the opposite. People say, "Oh, that means nothing bad is going to happen to me." The context is exactly the opposite, you can guarantee that if you follow Jesus some bad things are going to happen to you. Unfair, unjust, wrong things - that's part of the cost. But God knows, God cares, and He will balance the scales.

**Mars Hill:** You described *I Was Just Wondering* as a book of many questions and a few answers. Isn't the Bible similarly a book of many questions and a few answers? The few answers meaning that God is in our confusion now, and that he will balance the scales?

**PY:** You could say that it's a book of many questions and many answers as well. The Book of Mormon and, as I understand it, the Koran are both believed to be dictated by God, that these are the literal words of the divine. The Book of

Mormon was found on gold plates buried somewhere in the backyard of Joseph Smith. The Koran was whispered to the prophet directly. The Bible has never been conceived that way. The Bible has always been human beings struggling with the big questions of the universe. Now I believe in inspiration and all that; I'm not questioning inspiration. I'm just saying that when God chose to give us his few answers, he didn't choose to give it in the form of gold plates in the backyard. He could have: he gave the Ten Commandments in a similar form, carved in stone by God's own finger. If he could write the Ten Commandments, he could write the whole Bible in stone, but he didn't do that. Instead, he had the Bible emerge out of individual crankiness - Jeremiah, Jonah. They were all strange people struggling with the great questions of the universe. And that's where we got our Bible. It's the sequence of people spoken to by God and responding to God. I think that says a lot. God almost always "errs," or what seems like error, on the side of human freedom. He gives us too much freedom. Why didn't he just kill Hitler? Why didn't he just kill Saddam Hussein? Look at all the people who would be saved, but he almost never does that. He lets it go, he just lets it go. Now the Bible tells us that he won't always let it go. He will at some point radically intervene, but so far he gives us as much rope as he could possible give us.

**Mars Hill:** With your passion for questions and your love of story have you ever considered writing fiction?

**PY:** Yes. I took two courses in fiction at the University of Chicago from a very fine fiction writer. What I found was that my fiction sounded like essays in the context of a story. Maybe with a lot of work I could clean that up, but I figure that somebody's got to write essays - so I'll write essays. A lot of what I write uses the devices of fiction as a narrative framework. The most common form I use is a narrative form. It's the pilgrim trying to figure this whole thing out. The articles I write for *Christianity Today* are articles like, "How I Learned to Stop Hating and Start Loving the Psalms." That in itself is a story. The book I'm writing right now is called, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. That in itself says, "Here's the Jesus he used to know and here's the Jesus he knows now." That's all that narrative or story is. I guess I concluded that the fiction I tried wasn't very good fiction. I want to stick with what I'm most comfortable with right now until I run out of ideas, then maybe I'll have nothing but stories left.

**Mars Hill:** Who are you currently drawn to in your own personal reading life?

**PY:** Well, the most recent book I read was *Lancelot* by Walker Percy. Percy is one of the unusual persons who writes novels of ideas, especially something like *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and *Second Coming*; these are idea novels that aren't so much in vogue these days. They got me interested in Percy, so just last night I started a biography of Percy called *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, by Jay Tolson. It's a wonderful book. I'm also reading again, *The Imitation of Christ*, by A'Kempis. I also have about four bookshelves of books I need to get to. Some of them are

science by people like Loren Eiseley, Freeman Dyson. Others of them are literature. And I try one night a week to read from the classics, either Shakespeare or one of the Russians. I've just been reading *The Creators*, by Daniel Boorstin, the Librarian of Congress. It's a massive book on art throughout the centuries. A huge topic and a huge book. I've got to tell you, though, the Christians stand out strong. One of the most recent chapters I read was on Dostoevsky, one of the people who really taught me theology. He's taught the world theology. He's taught people who don't believe in God theology because he is that powerful. People who would never read a book by Francis Schaeffer or Karl Barth read Dostoevsky and he's talking to them about God.

**Mars Hill:** Since we're talking about writers, you called Augustine, Buechner, Chesterton, T.S. Eliot, Lewis, Moltmann, MacDonald, Pascal, Sayers, Thielicke, and Williams your pastors. That doesn't seem like the traditional view of pastoring. In what sense have they pastored you?

**PY:** As I understand it, pastors do two functions. They represent God to the people, and they represent the people to God. Obviously, any writer can only do one of those functions, represent God to the people. But they have done that part of pastoring better than any hired or paid pastor I've had. I think some of it has to do with personality. I mean, why am I a writer? Frankly, I don't trust speakers. It's too easy for them to use manipulative devices. A skilled person can communicate anything convincingly and a gullible crowd will believe it. We've seen that though history for ages. Of course the same danger exists in writing but it's harder to pull off because writing is a very freedom-enhancing act. Listening to a speaker is not a very freedom-enhancing act. They are in control and you are not. You give your control to them and they guide you and manipulate you. When I'm reading a book, I vote every time I turn the page whether to keep reading or not. It's a very democratic act. And because I grew up around speakers who duped me, I am suspicious of them and less suspicious of writers. I need a pastor that I can trust, not one I feel I may be manipulated by. The writers that I've said pastored me just say, "This is what we think, take it or leave it." Those are the ones I've taken.

**Mars Hill:** So there's a point of connection between your story and what they have written about as a result of grappling with what it means to be human. Who are a few of the people you would want to sit down with and interview, or talk about life and things that matter?

**PY:** What I have found is that I prefer out-of-the-way people, people who haven't gotten a lot of publicity. I've written three books with Dr. Paul Brand who was a total unknown. I've discovered people like Robert Coles, the psychiatrist at Harvard who has written a number of books. I have interviewed people like Annie Dillard and Henri Nouwen. I generally don't like celebrities who have been interviewed a lot. For one thing, they have heard every question and they have a little prepared tape, they just push button number sixteen. So I never feel like I'm

getting the real scoop, I'm getting the programmed scoop. One person I would really enjoy interviewing is Václav Havel, the president of the Czech Republic. I read his book and admire him greatly; he understands Christianity through and through and yet is not a Christian. There are some Jewish scholars who are in the same category. Jacob Neusner has written five hundred books and he recently wrote a book on Jesus. He tried to put himself in Matthew's day and listen with deep respect to everything Jesus had to say, but he walked away from Jesus. Those kind of people fascinate me. I like to find people who don't think like I do, who think differently than I do. Those are the people who stretch me.